

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**BRANDON  
SANDERSON**



**DEFENDING  
ELYSIUM**

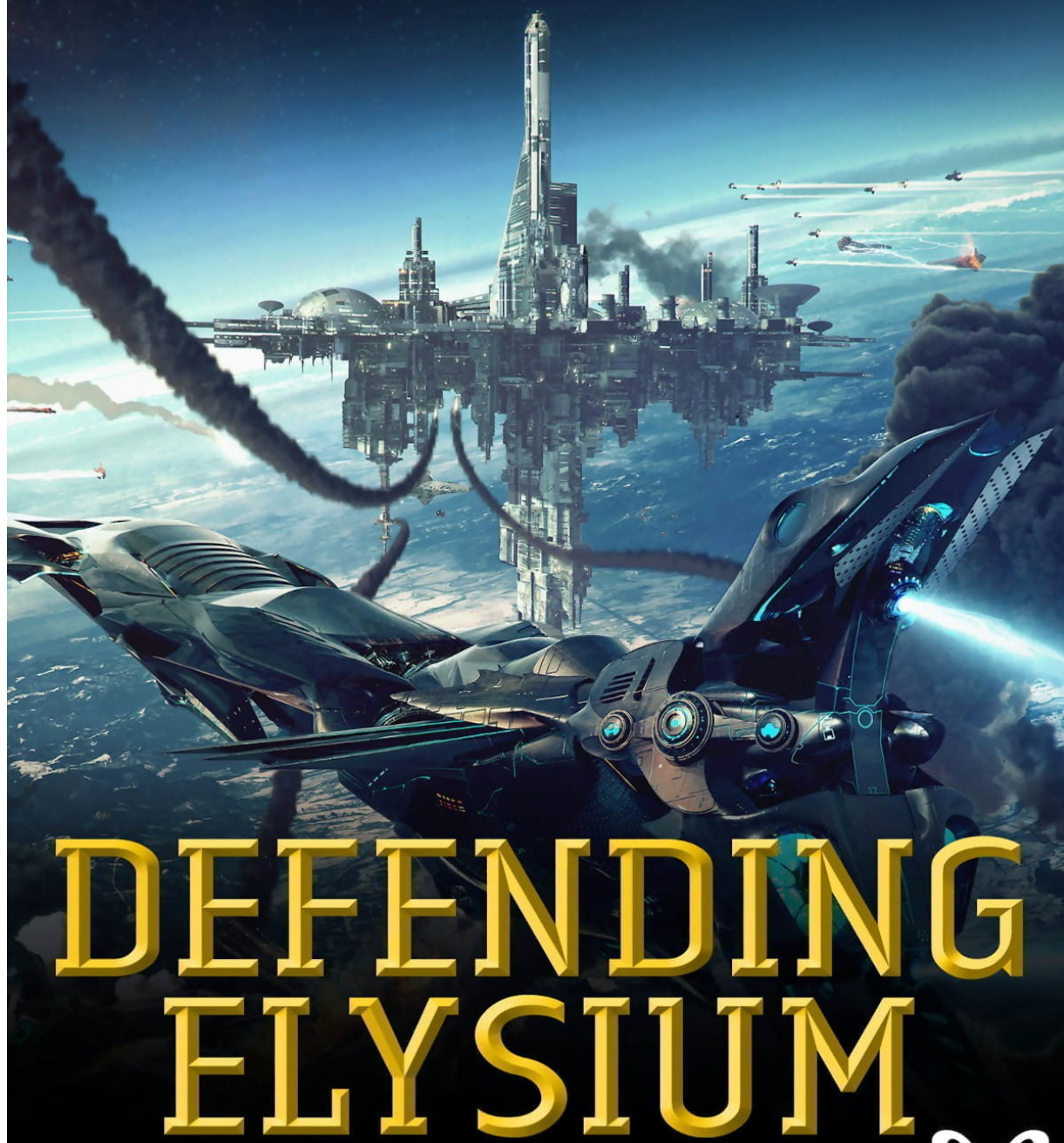
A CYTOVERSE NOVELLA





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### **Winner of Spain's UPC Award for Science Fiction in 2007.**

Centuries before Spensa looked skyward from the planet Detritus—back on Old Earth before it was lost—Jason Write faced a crucial question: was humanity ready to join galactic society?

When faster-than-light communications were discovered by a small telephone company in 2071, alien species such as the Tenasi and Varvax overheard them and came to visit Earth. Because the Phone Company controls all communications with the aliens, their operatives like Jason operate above the law.

Now, on the space platform Evensong, one of the Phone Company's scientists has gone missing before surfacing in a hospital with amnesia, and Jason is sent to investigate. Right as he arrives, the body of a murdered Varvax ambassador is discovered, sure to cause a galactic incident. Coln Abrams of the United Intelligence Bureau seizes the opportunity to investigate Jason as he deals with the crisis. This could be the UIB's chance to discover the Phone Company's secrets—how does FTL communication work, and what is Jason hiding?



Brandon Sanderson

# **Defending Elysium**

**A Cytoverse Novella**

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# CONTENTS

**Preface**

**PROLOGUE**

**Chapter 1**

**Chapter 2**

**Chapter 3**

**Chapter 4**

**Chapter 5**

**Chapter 6**

**Chapter 7**

**Chapter 8**

**Chapter 9**

**Chapter 10**

**Chapter 11**

**Chapter 12**

**Chapter 13**

**Chapter 14**

**Chapter 15**

**Chapter 16**

**Chapter 17**

**Chapter 18**

**Chapter 19**

**Chapter 20**

**Chapter 21**

**About the Author**

# PREFACE

**LATE IN 2017**, I needed to write a book really quickly. I'd pulled *The Apocalypse Guard* from my publisher, feeling that the novel wasn't quite up to my standards yet. I'd promised them a replacement.

Fortunately, I had an idea. A story about a group of humans trapped on a planet, fighting a mysterious enemy, with no understanding of why they were confined there (on what was essentially a prison planet). And this fit perfectly with an old idea I'd had—and even written a story about. That story being *Defending Elysium*: the tale of a universe that wasn't ready for humankind to be unleashed upon it.

I'd always felt *Defending Elysium* had more potential than just one novella. I turned away from it not because of any flaw in it, but because I wanted specifically to establish myself as a fantasy novelist. And as one of the last stories I'd written before getting published, *Defending Elysium* was really a picture of Brandon as a professional who hadn't yet been able to make a sale. It represented the best of what I could do in those months before I finally broke in.

But now I had a chance to do that setting justice. I'd always been intrigued by the idea of people who could teleport, and built both stories (this and *Skyward*) around the existence of people who were themselves the source of faster-than-light travel in the universe. And as I was working on *Cytonic*, the third book of the *Skyward* series, I felt it was time to really start talking about Jason and his story, and how it related to Spensa and her story.

As such, it's now time to re-release this story digitally, so people who are reading the Skyward series can (I hope) discover the origin of the Cytoverse and the ideas that (after pupating for over a decade) gave rise to *Skyward*.

**THIS STORY WAS** written on a beach near Monterey, California, and remains the only published piece of mine I did entirely in longhand before transcribing it to the computer. I'd never been to Monterey before, and a friend was able to trade something he did at work for a week's stay in a little condo-style hotel. We had two rooms and a very nice view over the city down toward the water.

So I guess I was doing the whole bohemian thing. During these days, I hadn't yet gotten published (this would have been late 2001 or early 2002). I had graduated from college, but had been rejected from all of the grad schools I'd applied for. I'd written about a dozen novels, and was annoyed with myself recently for not writing books that were true to what I wanted to be as a writer.

The call regarding the sale of *Elantris* would not come for another year or so. I was working a graveyard shift at the hotel, renting a room in a friend's basement for three hundred dollars a month, and spending all the time I could practicing my craft. (In part to delay thinking about what I was going to do with my life since my writing wasn't selling and grad schools didn't want me.)

Over the next year, I would write a book called *The Way of Kings* (different from the eventual published version, and now known as *The Way of Kings Prime*), the best—yet most flawed—book I wrote during my unpublished years. A massive, beastly epic that was my symbolic discarding of any desire to chase the market or write anything that was not the type of writing I loved to read.

That was my mindset. I remember a couple of long afternoons sitting on the beach, listing to the waves and staring out over the ocean as I wrote. A good friend named Annie was there for most of it—you may know her as the woman that Sarene from *Elantris* was based on—writing in her journal.



Micah (Captain Demoux from the *Mistborn* books, and the official Brandon Sanderson jacket flap photographer) was in and out. Mostly he was off taking photos.

I remember wanting to see if I could imbue a short story with the type of characterization and multiple plots that I liked in my epic fantasy. I had an idea for a character with a deep and interesting past, alongside a nice dissonant element (a secret agent working for the phone company). That, along with an interesting idea for an ending, grew into this story.

Oddly, I was able to make this work in a short story the way I wanted, while writing shorter novels hadn't worked for me. I chalk that one up to me starting to find the natural size for a story and writing it at that size. Ironically, the novels I'd written recently (*Final Empire* and *Mistborn*, the ideas for which would eventually be recycled into a single volume you know as *Mistborn: The Final Empire*) were ones that I'd tried intentionally to write short. And in doing that, I'd ended up filling each book with too few ideas for even their short length.

With *Defending Elysium*, I took a short story (well, short novella) and filled it with as many ideas as I could pack into the space. The result is a very dense story (in plot, history, and world terms) that ended up satisfying all of the epic storytelling buttons I like having pushed.

I ended up submitting this to *Leading Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy* (the magazine I worked on) during one of my last months there. I did it under a pseudonym, a practice common for staff members, to get some feedback. (*Leading Edge* gives feedback on all submissions. I didn't intend to publish it there; I just wanted some honest opinions.) Turns out that one of my best friends read the story, then spent about an hour the following evening telling me about this great story he'd read out of the slush, and how he couldn't believe that such an awesome story had ended up getting submitted to *Leading Edge* just out of nowhere. (That gave me an inkling that the story might have some potential...)

That's the background. For those who like to dig deeper into the meaning and context of a story, perhaps that gives you something to chew on. This was a melancholy time of my life—perhaps the period when I was most adrift—yet at the same time it was one of the most artistically

uninhibited times of my life. No contracts, no deadlines, no artificial rules imposed on myself. I had decided that the world could do whatever it wanted, and I would just write what I loved even if it never got published.

So, of course, the following year this story got an honorable mention in Writers of the Future and *Elantris* got picked up by Tor. A few years later, I did a couple of serious revisions on the story and submitted it to the UPC science fiction contest in Spain. It won first place, and I subsequently sold it in the US to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, where it appeared in the October/November 2008 issue and so far remains my only fiction appearance in a major print magazine.

**BRANDON SANDERSON**





# PROLOGUE

**THE WOMAN THRASHED** and spasmed in the hospital bed. Her dark hair was matted to her head with sweat, and her uncontrolled motions seemed almost epileptic. Her eyes, however, did not have the wildness of the insane—instead they were focused. Determined. She was not mad; she just couldn't control her muscles. She kept waving her hands in front of her with awkward movements, movements that seemed strangely familiar to Jason.

And she did it all in silence, never uttering a word.

Jason switched off the holovid, then leaned back in his chair. He had watched the vid a dozen times, but it still confused him. However, he couldn't do anything until he arrived at Evensong. Until then, he would simply have to bide his time.

# 1

**JASON WRITE HAD** always felt an empathy for the Outer Platforms. There was something about the way they hung alone in space, claimed by neither planet nor star. They weren't lonely—they were... solitary. Autonomous.

Jason sat beside the shuttle's port window, looking at Evensong as it approached. The platform resembled others of its kind—a flat sheet of metal fifty miles long, with buildings sprouting from both its top and bottom. It wasn't a ship, or even a space station—it was nothing more than a collection of random buildings surrounded by a bubble of air.

Of all the Outer Platforms, Evensong was the most remote. It hung between the orbits of Saturn and Uranus, the farthest deep-space human outpost. In a way, it was like an Old West border town, marking the edge of civilization. Except in this case—no matter what humankind liked to think—civilization lay outside the border, not within it.

As the shuttle approached, Jason could Sense the city's separate skyrises and towers, many of them linked by walkways. He sat with his eyes turned to the window, though the position was redundant. He had been legally blind since he'd turned sixteen. It had been years since he could even make out shadows or light. Fortunately, he had other methods of seeing.

He could Sense lights shining from windows and streets. To him, their white light was a quiet buzz in his mind. He could also Sense the line of buildings rising in a way that was reminiscent of an old Earth city skyline.

Of course, there wasn't really a sky or a horizon. Just the blackness of space.

*Blackness.* Voices laughed in the back of his mind. Memories. He pushed them away.

The shuttle slid into Evensong's atmospheric envelope—the platform had no sphere or force field, like some of the older space stations employed. Element-specific gravity generators had eliminated the need for such things, and had opened space for mankind. ESG, along with fusion generators, meant that humankind could toss an inert piece of metal into space, then populate it with millions of individuals.

Jason sat back as the shuttle made its final approach. He had a private cabin, of course. It was well furnished and comfortable—a necessity for such a long trip. The room smelled faintly of his dinner—steak—and otherwise had a sterile, well-cleaned scent to it. Jason approved—if he had owned a home, he would have kept it in a similar way.

*I suppose it is time for the vacation to end,* Jason thought. Silently bidding farewell to his relaxed solitude, Jason reached up to tap the small control disk attached to the skin behind his right ear. A sound clicked in his ear—the acknowledgment that his call was being relayed across the void to Earth so far away. Faster-than-light communication—a gift given to Earth as a reward for mankind's most embarrassing political faux pas of all time.

"You called?" a perky feminine voice sounded in his ear.

Jason sighed. "Lanna?"

"Yup."

"I don't suppose anyone else is there?" Jason asked.

"Nope, just me."

"Aaron?"

"Assigned to Riely," Lanna said. "He's investigating CLA labs on Jupiter Platform Seventeen."

"Doran?"

"On maternity leave. You're stuck with me, old man."

"I'm not old," Jason said. "The shuttle has arrived. I'm initiating a constant link."

"Affirmative."



Jason felt the shuttle set down in the docks. “Where’s my hotel?”

“It’s fairly close to the shuttle docks,” Lanna replied. “It’s called the Regency Fourth. You’re registered as a Mister Elton Flippenday.”

Jason paused. “Elton Flippenday?” he asked flatly, feeling the docking clamps send a shudder through the ship. “What happened to my standard alias?”

“John Smith?” Lanna asked. “That’s far too boring, old man.”

“It’s not boring,” Jason said. “It’s unassuming.”

“Yes, well, I know rocks that are less ‘unassuming’ than that name. It’s boring. You operatives are supposed to lead lives of excitement and danger—John Smith doesn’t fit.”

*This is going to be a long assignment,* Jason thought.

A quiet sound buzzed in the room—an indication that docking had finished. Jason rose, fetched his single bag of luggage, slid on his sunglasses, and left his quarters. He knew the glasses would look odd, but his sightless eyes tended to put people on edge. Especially when they discovered that he was obviously able to see despite his unfocused pupils.

“So, how was the trip?” Lanna asked.

“Fine,” Jason said tersely, walking down the shuttle’s hallway and nodding toward the captain. The man ran a good crew—in Jason’s opinion, any crew that left him alone was a good one.

“Come on,” Lanna prodded in his ear. “It had to be more than just ‘fine.’ What kind of food did they serve? Did you have any problems with the...” She droned on, but Jason stopped paying attention. He was focused on something else—a slight warble in Lanna’s voice. It sounded for only a brief second, but Jason immediately knew what it meant. The line was being tapped.

Lanna had undoubtedly heard it as well—she was loquacious, but not incompetent—but she continued as if nothing had happened. She would wait for Jason’s signal.

“How are the kids?” Jason asked.

“My nephews?” Lanna replied, not breaking the rhythm of her conversation as she received his coded request. “The older one’s fine, but the younger one has the flu.”

The younger one was sick. That meant the tap was on Jason's end, not hers. Interesting. Someone had managed to get close enough to scan his control disk without him noticing.

Lanna fell silent. She was preparing a tap block, but would only act if Jason ordered it. He didn't.

Instead, he stepped out of the shuttle and walked down the short ramp to the arrival station. Spread before him sat a line of scanning arches, meant to search for weaponry. Jason strode through them without concern—there wasn't a scanner in human space that could discover his weapons. He nodded with a smile as he passed a guard; the man smelled faintly of tobacco and was wearing a blue uniform that registered as a pulsing rhythm in Jason's mind. The guard frowned as he saw the silver PC pin on Jason's lapel, then turned a suspicious eye on his scanners.

Jason stepped aside as the other passengers formed a line at the registration counter, ostensibly searching for his ID. He watched them with his Sense, however, his useless eyes turned downward. Most of the people wore the soft rhythm of navy, the roar of white, or the still silence of black. None of them stood out, but he memorized the patterns of their faces. The person who had tapped his line must have been on the shuttle.

After they had all passed, Jason pretended to find his ID—one of the old plastic ones, rather than a new holoivid card. A tired security man, his breath smelling of coffee, accepted the ID and began processing Jason's papers. The guard was a young man, and his skin was tinted blue after one of the newer fashion trends. The man worked slowly, and Jason's eyes drifted to a holoivid playing on the back counter. It displayed a news program.

"... found murdered in an incineration building," the anchor said.

Jason snapped upright.

"Jason," Lanna's voice said urgently in his ear. "I just picked something up on the newsfeeds. There's been a—"

"I know," Jason said, accepting his ID back and dashing out of the customs station and onto the street.

## 2

**CAPTAIN ORSON ANSED**, Evensong PD, hustled through Topside's slums. It still surprised him that Evensong had slums. All of the platform's buildings were built of rich telanium, a super-light, silvery metal that didn't corrode or fall apart. In fact, most of the buildings had been prefabricated with the platform, and were an extension of its sheetlike hull. The buildings were spacious, well constructed, and sleek.

And still there were slums. It didn't matter that Evensong's poor lived in homes that many wealthy Earthsiders couldn't afford. By comparison, they were still poor. Somehow their dwellings reflected that. There was a sense of despair to the area. Shiny, modern buildings were hung with ragged drapes and drying clothing. Aircars were rare, pedestrians common.

"Over here, Captain," one of his men said, motioning toward a building. It was long and squat—though like all buildings on the platform, it had other structures built on top of it. The officer, a new kid named Ken Harris, led Orson inside, and Orson was immediately struck by a pungent smoky scent. The building was a burning station, where organic materials were recycled.

Officers moved about in the darkened room. Like most buildings on Evensong, this one was poorly lit. Even-song's distance from the sun kept it in a perpetual state of twilight, and the platform's inhabitants had grown accustomed to having less light. Many of them kept the lights dim even indoors. The tendency had bothered Orson at first, but he rarely noticed it anymore.

Several officers saluted, and Orson waved them down with a perfunctory gesture. “What’ve we got here?”

“Come and look, sir,” Harris said, weaving through some equipment toward the back of the room.

Orson followed; eventually they stopped beside a massive cylindrical burner. Its metallic face was dark and flat. One of the bottom reservoir doors was open, revealing the dust below. Mixed with the dirt and ash was a large section of carapace, its shell stained black from the heat.

Orson swore quietly, kneeling beside the carapace. He poked at the shell with a stirring rod. “This is our missing ambassador?”

“That is what we assume, sir,” Harris said.

*Great*, Orson thought with a sigh. The varvax had been asking about their ambassador since its disappearance two weeks before.

“What do we know?” Orson asked.

“Not much,” Harris said. “These burners are only emptied once a month. The carapace has been in there for some time—there’s almost nothing left. Any longer, and we wouldn’t have found it.”

*That might have been preferable*, Orson thought. “What did the sensor net record?”

“Nothing,” Harris said.

“Does the media know about this?” Orson asked hopefully.

“I’m afraid so, sir,” Harris said. “The worker who found the body leaked the information.”

Orson sighed. “All right, then, let’s...”

He trailed off. A figure was silhouetted in the building’s open door—a figure not wearing a police uniform. Orson swore quietly, standing. The officers outside were supposed to keep the press out.

“I’m sorry,” Orson said, walking toward the intruder, “but this area is restricted. You can’t...”

The man ignored him. He was tall and thin, with a triangular face and short-cropped black hair. He wore a simple black suit, a little outdated but otherwise indistinctive, and a pair of dark glasses. He brushed past Orson with an air of indifference.

Orson reached out to grab the insolent stranger, but froze. There was a gleaming pin on the man's lapel—a small silver bell.

*What!* Orson thought with amazement. *When did a PC operative get here? How did he know?* The questions didn't really matter—regardless of their answers, one thing was certain. Orson's jurisdiction had come to an end.

The Phone Company had arrived.

### 3

**IT HAD FINALLY** happened a hundred and forty years before, in the year 2071. Oddly enough, the ones who had made first contact had been an outdated, nearly bankrupt phone company.

Northern Bell Incorporated had been on the losing side of technological progress. While its competitors had been researching and incorporating holovid technology, Northern Bell had tried something a little more daring: cybernetic-based telepathic linking.

Cyto, as it was dubbed, had turned out to be a failure. Holovid technology was not only cheaper and more stable, it also worked. Cyto had not worked—at least not as Northern Bell had hoped. In the last days before its impending bankruptcy, the company had finally managed to get a few squeaks of sound through the system. Those squeaks, while unimpressive to their human monitors, were also inadvertently projected through space to a group of beings known as the tenasi. The tenasi reply had been the first interspecies contact Earth had ever known.

Second contact had been made by the United Governments military when they accidentally shot down a tenasi ambassadorial vessel. But that, of course, was an entirely different story.

“He’s been missing for two weeks?” Jason asked, kneeling beside the burned carapace. It was silent in his mind—a foreboding indication of its black color.

“Yes, sir,” the officer said.

“Yup,” Lanna said at almost the same time.

“Why wasn’t I informed of this?” Jason asked.

The police officer looked confused for a moment before realizing that Jason wasn’t talking to him. Earlinks were a common, if confusing, part of modern life.

“I assumed you knew, old man,” Lanna said. “You know, Jason, for an all-knowing spy type, you’re remarkably uninformed.”

Jason grunted, standing. She was right—he should have looked into local news stories during his trip. It was too late now.

The officer regarded Jason with hard eyes. Jason could read the man’s emotions easily. Not through the use of his cytonic senses—it was a common misconception that psionics were telepathic. No, Jason could read the man’s emotions because he was accustomed to dealing with local law enforcement. The officer would be annoyed at Jason for interfering with his investigation. But at the same time, the officer would be relieved. Local men always felt overwhelmed when it came to dealing with other species. Aliens were to be handled by the Phone Company. The PC had made first contact; the PC had negotiated Earth out of danger following the tenasi incident. The PC had brought FTL communication to humankind.

So the officer watched Jason—jealous, but thankful. Jason could hear other officers muttering at the edges of the room, angry at his interference. *Dirty PC. Why is he here? Why does he look at us like that? Can’t you see? What’s that in front of your face? Is it my fist? Can you see it if I hit you? Maybe that will—*

“Jason?” Lanna’s voice sounded in his ear.

Jason snapped to, muscles twitching, memories fading. He still knelt beside the burner. The officer still stood staring at him, the room still smelled overpoweringly of smoke, and he could still hear the reporters arguing with officers outside.

“I’m all right,” Jason whispered.

He stood, dusting off his suit, listening to the reporters. They, like the policemen, would probably assume that Jason had come to Evensong to investigate the ambassador’s death. It didn’t matter that Jason’s shuttle had left for Evensong over a month before the murder. An alien had died, and a PC operative had arrived. That would be enough for them.

“I shouldn’t have come to the scene,” he mumbled.

“What else would you have done?” Lanna asked. “This is our duty, after all.”

“Not mine,” Jason said. “I’m here to retrieve a missing scientist, not investigate a murder.” Then, speaking louder, he continued. “I’m certain the local law enforcement is competent. Let them investigate—the PC can handle diplomatic negotiations.”

The officer looked surprised. But, apparently uncertain what else to do, he saluted Jason. Jason nodded, then turned to leave.

“Not that the ‘diplomatic negotiations’ will be too hard,” Lanna noted. “The varvax are so insanely docile that they’ll probably apologize for inconveniencing one of our murderers.”

“They’re all like that,” Jason said, stepping out onto the building’s front steps. “That’s the big problem, isn’t it?”

There was a moment of shocked silence as the reporters realized who he was. They stood in a ring around several beleaguered police, and the commotion was attracting a crowd of curious onlookers. Then the reporters exploded with questions. Jason ignored them, pushing his way through the crowd. He had his head bowed, his hand raised to forestall questions. However, in his mind he was looking.

He scanned the crowd, pushing through the humming and pulsing colors. He looked over each face, comparing them to the ones in his memory. A smile crept to his lips as he found what he was looking for. The media let him leave—they were used to the PC ignoring their questions. Behind him, Jason could hear their on-the-spot vidcasts. They had all the facts wrong, of course. There was fear in their voices—a fear of what they didn’t understand, a fear of the retribution that might come. In their world, retribution was assumed. In their world, you hurt that which was weaker than you.

Jason continued to walk with his head bowed. Behind him, a man broke free from the group of onlookers and wandered in Jason’s direction, obviously trying to look casual.

“I wish there were more flowers,” Jason said.



A second later, a click sounded in his ear. Then Lanna sighed. “What took you so long?” she demanded. “I’ve been waiting for you to do that ever since you got off the shuttle. I feel creepy knowing someone’s hacking our line.”

Jason continued to stroll forward. His shadow followed—the man moved with the skill of one who had been well trained, but he made the mistakes of one who was inexperienced. There was no change to his step—he probably hadn’t noticed the switchover. At that moment, he would be listening to a fabricated conversation between Lanna and Jason. For some reason, Jason suspected he didn’t want to know what kind of silly things Lanna’s replicated version of his voice was saying.

“Is he buying it?” Lanna asked.

“I think so,” Jason said, walking away from the slums. “He’s still following.”

“Who do you think he’s with?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Jason turned, taking the steps down into an airtrain station. The man followed.

“If you caught him this quickly, he must not be very good.”

“He’s young,” Jason said. “He knows what he’s supposed to do, but he doesn’t know how to do it.”

“A reporter,” Lanna guessed.

“No,” Jason said. “He’s too well equipped. Remember, he managed to hack into a secure FTL comm.”

“One of the corporations?”

“Maybe,” Jason said, strolling into an underground café. It smelled of dirt, mold, and coffee. His follower waited for a few moments outside, then walked in and took a table a discreet distance from Jason.

Jason ordered a cup of coffee.

“We haven’t discussed how he managed to scan your disk,” Lanna noted. “You’re losing your edge, old man.”

“I’m not old,” Jason mumbled as the waitress brought his coffee. It smelled of cream, though he had ordered it black. He turned his ineffectual eyes on a newspaper someone else had left on the table, but his mind

studied his follower. The man was indeed young—in his early twenties. He wore softly humming greys and browns.

“So,” Lanna said, “do you want to try and get me a visual so I can look him up?”

Jason paused. “No,” he finally said, taking a sip of his coffee. It did have far too much cream in it—probably an attempt to obscure its poor flavor.

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“Be patient.”

## 4

**COLN ABRAMS SIPPED** his coffee—it didn't have enough cream. He had to keep telling himself not to look at his target. Coln didn't actually need to watch the man to monitor the conversation, he just had to stay within range.

*What are you doing here, Write?* Coln wondered with frustration. *How did you know the ambassador would be killed? What does all of this have to do with your plans?*

Coln shook his head. Jason Write, head operative for Northern Bell Phone Company, one of the most enigmatic people in the Solar System. What was he doing on Evensong? The United Intelligence Bureau knew a lot about the man, but for every known fact there seemed to be two more missing.

Take, for instance, the Tenasi Agreement. Coln had read the document itself a hundred times, and had watched the holovids, commentaries, and old newscasts relating to the Tenasi Incident over and over. The United Governments military had accidentally shot down a tenasi diplomatic vessel—thereby initiating a rather embarrassing first contact. Earth had been thrown into a chaos of confusion and worry. Were they being invaded? Would they be invaded now that they had made such a horrible mistake?

Then the PC had stepped in. Somehow—using means they had yet to explain—they had contacted the tenasi. The PC had brought peace to Earth. But in exchange, the company had demanded a steep price. From that moment on, the PC had become completely autonomous—untaxable,

unquestionable, and completely above the law. In addition, the PC had secured sole rights to the aliens' FTL communications technology. And, with those two concessions, the PC had become the most powerful, most arrogant force in the system.

Coln gripped his mug tightly, barely noticing as the waitress brought his sandwich. He was still listening to the conversation between Write and his Base Support Operative—they were discussing what color roses they liked best.

Coln had never trusted the PC—and he hated things he couldn't trust. The PC grew fat off its treaties—it held exclusive contracts with all twelve alien races humankind had met. The alien races all refused to deal with Earth unless they went through the PC first. The Phone Company kept humankind locked in space, refusing to share FTL travel technology. It claimed that the aliens had yet to give it to them. Coln suspected the truth. The aliens had FTL travel, that was certain. The PC was simply keeping it from humankind, and that infuriated Coln. He wanted to find—

Coln froze. The conversation in his ear had stopped midsentence. For a panicked moment, Coln feared that Write had slipped out of the restaurant and out of range.

Coln's eyes darted across the room. He was relieved to find Write sitting in his booth, sipping quietly at his coffee. It had simply been a lull in the conversation.

"What do you think he'll do when he realizes his cover is blown?" the Base Support Operative, Lanna, said in Coln's ear.

Coln paused.

"I don't know." Jason Write's voice was firm. Arrogant. Coln could see Write's lips moving as he spoke. "I suspect he will be surprised. He's young—he assumes he's better than he really is."

Write looked up, his sunglassed eyes looking directly at Coln's face. Horror rose in Coln's chest, an emotion quickly followed by shame. He'd been discovered.

"Come here, boy," Write ordered in Coln's ear.

Coln shot a look at the door. He could probably get away—

“If you leave,” Write said, “then you will never discover why I am on Evensong.” His voice was sharp and businesslike.

Coln regarded the man indecisively. What should he do? Why hadn’t any of his classes covered situations like this one? When an agent was discovered, he was supposed to pull out. But what if his target seemed willing to talk to him?

Slowly, Coln rose and crossed the café’s dirty floor. Write’s sunglasses watched him quietly. Coln stood for a moment beside Write’s table, then sat stiffly.

*Don’t reveal anything, Coln warned himself. Don’t let him know that you’re with the—*

“You are young for a UIB agent,” Write said.

Inwardly, Coln sighed. *He already knows. What have I gotten myself—and the Bureau—into?*

“I wonder,” Write said, taking a sip of his coffee. “Is the Bureau growing more confident in its young agents, or am I simply slipping in priority?”

*He doesn’t know!* Coln realized with surprise. *He thinks I’m here officially.*

“Neither,” Coln said, thinking quickly. “We weren’t ready for you to leave. I was the only field agent who was unassigned at the time. It was simply poor luck.”

Write nodded to himself.

*He accepted it!*

“I must say,” Write said, setting down his mug, “I am growing tired of the UIB. Every time I think that you people are going to leave me alone, I find myself being followed again.”

“If the PC weren’t so untrustworthy,” Coln said, “its operatives wouldn’t have to worry about being followed.”

“If the Bureau weren’t so poor at investigation,” Write said, “it would have realized by now that the PC is the only company that the Bureau *can* trust.”

Coln flushed. “Are you going to say something useful, or are you just going to insult me?”

“A clever man would realize that my insults contain the most useful information you’ll likely receive,” Write said.

Coln snorted, rising from the chair. Write had just invited him over to gloat, and Coln had ruined his own career for nothing. He had been so certain that he could tail Write, that he could figure out what the man was doing, discover the truth behind the Tenasi Agreement...

“You may accompany me,” Write said, finishing his coffee.

Coln paused midstep. “What?”

Write set down his mug. “You want to know what I’m doing? Well, you may come with me. Maybe this will finally alleviate the UIB’s foolish suspicions. I’m tired of being followed.”

“Jason,” Lanna said in Coln’s ear. “Are you certain—”

“No,” Write said. “I’m not. However, I don’t have time to deal with the UIB right now. This is a simple mission—the boy may come with me if he wishes.”

Coln stood, dumbfounded. He couldn’t decide what to do. Could he really trust a PC operative? No, he couldn’t. But what if he learned something important? “I—”

“Hush,” Write said suddenly, holding up a hand.

Coln frowned. Write wasn’t looking at him, however. He was staring straight ahead, his face confused.

*Now what?* Coln wondered.

## 5

**SOMETHING WAS WRONG.** Jason ran his mind around the room, trying to Sense what was bothering him. The café had about a dozen other occupants, all eating quietly. Most of them were in workers' clothing—flannels and denim that pulsed an irregular symphony in Jason's mind. He studied their faces, and recognized none of them. What was bothering him?

A line of bullets blasted through the window just beside Jason. They came far too fast for his body to react or dodge, moving with the incredible speed of modern weaponry.

As fast as the bullets were, however, Jason's mind was faster. He whipped out a dozen invisible mindblades that slashed through the air. The force of his attack slapped the bullets backward as well as sliced each one in two. There was a series of audible clicks as the pieces bounced back off the window, then fell to the café floor. All was silent.

The UIB kid plopped into his seat, his face horrified as he stared at the window and its holes.

"Jason?" Lanna said urgently. "Jason, what happened?"

Jason Sensed out the window, but the sniper was already gone. "I don't know."

"Someone shot at you?" Lanna asked with concern.

Jason regarded the bullet holes—they ran in a small circle in the window just beside the UIB kid's head. "No," he said. "They tried to kill the kid."

The café's patrons were running about in fear, some calling out, others hiding beneath benches. The UIB kid was looking down at himself with surprise, as if he couldn't believe that he was still alive. "They all missed," the boy whispered with amazement.

Jason frowned. Why would someone try to kill a UIB agent? Why not focus on Jason? The PC was a far more dangerous threat.

"How did you let him sneak up on you like that?" Lanna asked.

"I wasn't expecting to be shot at. This was supposed to be a simple assignment." Then, turning to the kid, he nodded. "Let's go."

The kid looked up with surprise. "Someone tried to kill me! Why?"

"I'm not certain," Jason said. He ran his Sense over the room one last time, memorizing faces. As he did so, he noticed something. While most of the people were hiding or quivering in fear, one didn't seem to be concerned at all. A solitary form sat quietly at the back of the café. He was a nondescript man with a long nose and a firm body. He watched Jason with interested eyes—eyes that seemed slightly unfocused. Almost as if...

*Impossible!* Jason thought. Then, without bothering to see if the UIB kid followed him, he left the café.



## 6

**“YOU MUST TAKE** the apologies of us,” Sonn urged. The varvax Foreign Minister’s words were delivered by a translation program, of course—the varvax language consisted of clicks and snaps accompanied by hand gestures. The figure on the holo vid screen was large and boxy, and its skin shone with quartz and granite. That was only the exoskeleton—the varvax were actually small creatures that floated in a nutrient bath sealed within their inorganic shells.

“Sonn,” Jason pointed out, sitting back in his chair, “your people were the victims here. Your ambassador was murdered.”

Sonn waved a clawlike hand; a symbol of denial. “You must understand that he knew the risks of living in an undeveloped civilization. Creatures of lesser intelligence cannot be held responsible for their acts of barbarity. You have not yet learned a better way.”

Jason smiled to himself. Comments like that one earned the varvax, and most other alien races, humankind’s disgust. It didn’t matter that the comments were true—in fact, the truth of such statements only enraged humankind more.

“We will return what is left of the body as soon as possible, Minister Sonn,” Jason promised.

“Thank you, Jason of the Phone Company. You must tell to me—how go your efforts at civilization? Will your people soon raise themselves to Primary Intelligence?”

“It will take some time yet, Minister Sonn,” Jason said.

“You are an interesting people, Jason of the Phone Company,” Sonn said, his claws held before him in a gesture of supplication.

“You may speak on.”

“You have such disparity among what you are,” Sonn said. “Some of Primary Intelligence, some of Tertiary—or even Quaternary—Intelligence. Such disparity. You must tell to me; are your people still convinced of the power of technology?”

Jason shrugged an exaggerated shrug—the varvax liked to watch and interpret human gestures. “Humankind believes in technology, Minister Sonn. It will be very difficult for them to accept another way.”

“Of course, Jason of the Phone Company. We will speak to each other again.”

“We will speak again,” Jason said, shutting off the holo-vid. He sat for a moment, Sensing the room around him. He couldn’t just relax completely anymore—he missed that. If he let his concentration lapse, the darkness would come upon him.

“They certainly are confident, aren’t they?” Lanna asked in his ear.

“They have reason to be,” Jason replied. “It has always happened as they expect. A race discovers FTL cytonic transmission at the same time it achieves a peaceful civilization.”

“If only they weren’t so cursed ingenuous,” Lanna said. “A part of me wishes I had three varvax diplomats, a card table, and a host of ‘useless’ technologies I could cheat out of them.”

“That’s the problem,” Jason said. “There’s a little of that in all of us.”

“What if they’re wrong, Jason?” Lanna asked. “What if we do get FTL travel before we’re ‘civilized’?”

Jason didn’t reply—he didn’t know the answer.

“I looked up the kid for you,” Lanna offered.

“Go on,” Jason said, rising and gathering his things. The attack the day before still had him worried. Was it an attempt to scare Jason off? From what?

“The day you left, a young UIB agent named Coln Abrams disappeared from the Bureau’s training facilities on Jupiter Fourteen,” Lanna said. “He stole some sophisticated monitoring equipment. The UIB put out several

warrants for him, but they aren't looking this far—apparently they didn't expect him to make it all the way to Evensong.”

“It isn't exactly a prime vacation spot,” Jason noted, strolling over to the window and trying to imagine what the city would look like to normal eyes. It would be dark, he decided—most of it didn't vibrate very much to him. Dark and tall, like a city constructed entirely of alleyways. Lights were sparse and insufficient, and the air smelled musty. It always seemed to be a few degrees below standard temperature too—as if the vacuum of space were closer, more ominous, than it really was.

“So,” Lanna said, “we've got a wanted felon. Can we turn him in?”

“No,” Jason said, turning from the window. He put on his suit coat and slid on his dark glasses.

“Come on, let's turn him in,” Lanna said. “In fact, it was probably the UIB who tried to have him killed yesterday.”

“They don't work that way,” Jason said, walking to the door. “Do you have my permits secured?”

“Yes,” Lanna said.

“Good. Turn the kid back on, and let's get going.”

## 7

**THE IMAGE WAS** blurred and poorly exposed. Un-fortunately, it was the best he had. Coln walked around the large holimage, studying it as he had hundreds of times before. The answer was before him; he could feel it. The image held a secret. Yet Coln, like thousands of others, was unable to determine just what that secret might be.

The image had been taken by the only spy to infiltrate the PC's central headquarters. It was a picture of a simple white room with an apparatus lining the back wall. That apparatus, whatever it was, powered all of humankind's FTL communications.

It was the greatest secret of the modern age. Humankind had been trying for nearly two centuries to break the PC's monopoly on FTL communication. Unfortunately, no amount of research had been able to duplicate the PC's strange technology—and until someone did, humankind would be indebted to a tyrant.

*It has to be here!* Coln thought, staring at the unyielding image. He walked around it to look at several angles. *If only it weren't so blurry.*

He looked closely at the holimage. A security guard sat against the right side of the room, staring in the photographer's direction. There seemed to be several cylindrical outcroppings on the far wall—relays of some kind? One was larger than the others, and dark in color. Was it the answer?

Coln sighed. Men far more technologically savvy than he had tried to dissect the image, but none had been able to draw any decisive conclusions.

The picture was just too fuzzy to be of much use.

He had spent the entire morning trying to decide why someone would try to kill him. He had only been able to come to one decision—that for some reason, Write had ordered him assassinated. The PC agent had been the one who had coerced Coln over to sit beside him, in the place where the assassin had shot. The PC was behind it somehow.

*Except the assassin missed, Coln thought. He must have done so on purpose. Write wanted to scare me off. He acted like he didn't care if I followed him, then he tried to frighten me away.*

Coln nodded. It made sense, in a twisted PC sort of way. And if Write didn't want him along, then Coln had to make certain he stayed.

"Wake up, kid," Lanna's voice crackled suddenly in his ear.

"I'm awake," Coln said, bristling at the reference to his age—twenty-three was hardly young enough to earn him the title of "kid." At least the other two had stopped feeding him dummy conversations—when they didn't want him to listen, they simply shut him out completely.

"The big guy's leaving," Lanna said in her pert voice. Coln was beginning to wonder why Write put up with her. "He says you can go with him, but only if you can keep up."

Coln cursed, throwing on his jacket.

"Oh, and Coln," Lanna said, "try not to steal anything from him. Jason's kind of attached to his equipment."

Coln flushed. How much did they know?

He dashed out into the hallway just in time to see Write's black-suited form turn a corner. Coln padded across the floor, catching up to the operative. Write barely acknowledged him. They walked in silence to the end of the hallway, then took the private lift down to the lobby. The lush carpets and rich furnishings hinted that they were far indeed from the previous day's slums.

"So, what is it?" Coln asked as they stepped out onto the silvery telanium street. The street, as always, was dimly lit—though hundreds of lights shone from windows and signs. Evensong was dark, but it did not sleep.

“What is what?” Write asked as an aircab—obviously chartered—pulled up in front of the hotel.

“What is your purpose here, Write?” Coln asked, climbing into the back of the car beside the operative. “I assume you knew something about the ambassador’s death?”

“You assume wrong,” Write said as the aircab began to move. “The ambassador’s murder was a coincidence.”

Coln raised an eyebrow in skepticism.

“Believe me or not, I don’t really care.”

“Then why are you here?” Coln asked.

Write sighed. “Tell him.”

“It happened just under two months ago, kid,” Lanna said. “A scientist named Denise Carlson disappeared from Evensong’s PC research facility.”

Coln frowned at the comment, searching through his memory. He paid attention to anything the Bureau learned about the PC. He recalled something about the scientist’s disappearance, but it hadn’t seemed very important.

“But,” Coln said, “our reports said she was nothing more than a lab assistant. The PC home office barely paid any mind to her disappearance—it said that she had been the victim of a common street mugging.”

“Well, at least someone pays attention to current events,” Lanna said.

Write snorted. “He might pay attention, but he should have realized that any story we downplay is far more important than it seems.”

Coln blushed. “So you came to find this Denise Carlson?”

“Wrong,” Lanna said. “That’s why he left, but that’s not the goal anymore. While Jason was in transit, we located Miss Carlson. Just under two weeks ago a woman fitting her description was picked up by the authorities. She was diagnosed with severe mental problems, and was checked into a local treatment ward.”

“So...” Coln said.

“So I’m here to retrieve her,” Write said. “Nothing more. We’re going to bring her back to Jupiter Fourteen so that she can receive proper treatment. My role is that of a simple courier.” Write smiled slightly, turning his black

glasses toward Coln. “That is why I am willing to let you come with me. You sacrificed your career so you could watch me escort a mental patient.”

## 8

**JASON STRODE INTO** the hospital, the depressed Coln tagging along behind. The kid kept asking questions, convinced that Jason's actions had some greater purpose in the PC's "master plans." Jason was beginning to regret bringing him along—the last thing he needed was another person jabbering at him.

The nurse at the front desk looked up with surprise when he entered, her eyes flickering toward his silver lapel pin.

"Mister Flippenday?" she asked.

He paused only briefly at the horrid name. "I am. Show me to the patient."

The nurse nodded, leaving the desk to another attendant and waving Jason to follow. She wore white—a roaring, blatant color. To others, white was neutral, but to Jason it was by far the most garish choice. Better the subtle hum of grey. The walls were white as well, and the hallways smelled of cleaning fluids.

*Why do they do that?* Jason wondered, shaking his head slightly. *Do they think that it will make their patients feel at home? Lifeless sterility and monochrome white? Perhaps all these people need to regain their sanity is a little bit of color.*

The nurse led them to a simple room with a locked door—ostensibly for the patient's safety.

"I'm glad you finally decided to come," the nurse said, a slightly chiding tone in her voice. "We contacted the PC weeks ago, and the



woman's just been waiting here all this time. With no relatives on the platform, one would think that you people..."

She trailed off as Jason turned toward her. After losing his eyesight, he had eventually learned that a look of discontent could be accomplished as much with one's bearing as with one's eyes. As he stared sightlessly at the nurse, her resolve weakened, and the punitive tone left her voice.

"That is enough," Jason said simply.

"Yes, sir," the nurse mumbled, shooting him a spiteful look as she unlocked the door.

Jason walked into the small, unadorned room. Denise sat beside a desk—the room's only furniture besides a bed and a dresser. She regarded Jason with wide eyes. She looked much as in his holovid—she was thin, her short dark hair in curls, and she wore a simple skirt and blouse.

Jason had met her several times before—Denise had shown an affinity for cyto, and had been midway through her training. She had once been a straightforward and calculating woman. Now she looked like a young squirrel that hadn't yet learned to fear predators.

"They said you would come," she whispered, the words awkward in her mouth. "Do you know who I am?"

Jason looked toward the nurse.

"She's still amnesiac," the nurse said. "Though we can't determine any physical reason for it. She also has some sort of muscular problem—she has trouble keeping her balance and controlling her limbs."

Denise demonstrated such, rising slowly to her feet. She wobbled slightly as she walked forward, but she managed to remain upright.

"She's made amazing progress," the nurse said. "She can walk now if she doesn't move too quickly."

"Denise, you're coming with me," Jason said. "Abrams, help her walk."

The kid looked up with surprise. Jason didn't give him time to complain—instead, Jason turned and strode from the room. Abrams cursed quietly, but did as he ordered, giving the confused Denise a helpful arm as they walked from the hospital.

They were nearly out when Jason noticed something. He never would have seen it without his Sense—the man hid behind a door, barely peeking

out. The Sense was far more discerning than normal eyes, however, and Jason recognized the face even through the door's small slit. It was one of the men from the café—not the strange man who had sat at the booth, but one of the ordinary workers.

*So, they've been watching her,* Jason thought as he left the building, the kid and Denise following. *Did they expect her to reveal something, or did they know that I would come for her?*

## 9

**"I DO NOT** know what this means," Denise said, staring at the menu with her wide eyes. She looked up, confused.

"You can't read?" Jason asked.

"No," Denise replied.

"Here, let me help," Abrams offered, reading down the list of choices.

Jason sat back, allowing himself a slight smile. The kid was showing an almost chivalrous devotion to the amnesiac woman. She was passably attractive, in a sickeningly innocent sort of way. Abrams was just betraying the inherent predisposition of a young human male; he had seen a woman in need and was trying to help her.

Denise raised her hand awkwardly in an odd gesture as Coln read. "I still do not know what it means."

"None of the words sound familiar?" Jason asked, leaning forward with interest.

"No."

"But you can speak," Jason mused. "What do you remember?"

"Nothing," Denise said. "I don't remember anything, Mister Flippenday."

Jason cringed. "Call me Jason," he mumbled as Abrams asked the girl what kind of food she liked. She, of course, didn't know.

She should have remembered more. Most amnesiacs remembered something—if only fragments. "What do you think?" Jason whispered.

“It’s odd,” Lanna said. “She’s changed, old man. Whatever they did to her, it was pretty thorough.”

“Agreed.”

Abrams ordered for the girl and himself—choosing, Jason noticed, two of the most expensive items on the menu. He knew that Jason would be paying. At least the kid had style.

As he sat, Jason thought back to the strange man in the café. The man couldn’t have access to cyto—in a hundred and fifty years, no one had discovered the ability besides the PC. But what if someone had? What if they had learned about Denise, and had captured her to try and learn what she knew? What had they done to her to get at her knowledge?

His pondering led him nowhere. Eventually the food came, and Jason began to eat. He preferred simple meals with little mess, so he had ordered a tossed pasta dish with a very light sauce. He ate quietly, thoughtful as he watched a man a short distance away haggle over his bill with the waiter.

He shouldn’t have been worried about the ambassador’s death. The police would probably find that the murder had been committed by some xenophobic activist group. They were prevalent. There were those who hated other species because of assumed superiority, those who hated them because they thought the aliens were too arrogant, and those who hated them simply because they were different. The student exchange program, where human children would be sent to other planets to learn of other species, had been defeated three times in the United Senate.

The ambassador’s death probably wasn’t related to Denise. Jason should leave—there were too many things that demanded his attention for him to waste time chasing false leads. This trip had taken far too long already.

Jason paused. Denise had turned and was staring at the man who was arguing about his bill. He raised his fist at the waiter, uttering a few epithets, then finally slapped down some money and stalked out of the building.

“Why is he like that?” Denise asked. “How can he be so angry?”

“That’s just the way people are sometimes,” Coln said uncomfortably. “How is your food?”

Denise turned her eyes down at the steak. She had taken several awkward bites, though Coln had been forced to cut it for her. "It's very..."

"Very what?" Jason prompted.

"I do not know," Denise confessed, blushing. "It tastes too... strong. One of the flavors is very odd."

Jason frowned. "What flavor?"

"I do not know. It was very strong in the hospital's food too, though I didn't say anything. I didn't want to offend them."

"Describe the taste to me," Jason said. Something was tickling at the back of his mind—a connection he should have made.

"Leave her alone, old man," Abrams said. "She's been through a lot."

Jason raised his eyebrows at the use of "old man." He heard Lanna chuckling through the FTL link. Jason ignored Abrams, turning his head toward Denise. "Describe the taste to me."

"I can't," Denise finally said. "You must understand—I don't know what it is."

Jason reached for the saltshaker, then sprinkled some salt on his hand. "Taste this," he ordered.

She did as asked, then nodded. "That's it. I do not like it very much."

Abrams rolled his eyes. "You've figured out that she doesn't know the word for salty. So? She doesn't know what any of these foods are, or even what her name is."

Jason sat back, ignoring the kid. Then he turned to his food and continued to eat in silence.

## 10

**"I'VE ARRANGED YOUR** return trip to Jupiter," Lanna said. "You'll be leaving on the courier ship *Excel* at 10:30 pm, local time."

Jason nodded to himself. He stood on his balcony, leaning against the railing as he listened to Lanna's voice in his ear.

"The ship is a good one, and always punctual—as you like them," Lanna said. "Your accommodations are for two people."

Jason didn't reply. He Sensed Evensong before him, feeling its massive metallic buildings and numerous walkways. Sometimes he tried to remember what it had been like to see. He tried to imagine colors as images, rather than as cytonic vibrations, but he had trouble. It had been so long, and his eyes hadn't been very good in the first place.

Evensong was in motion around him—aircars flew, people moved on the walkways, lights flickered on and off. It was beautiful, in a way. Beautiful that humankind had expanded this far, that it had found a way to thrive even here, in the middle of space, where the sun was barely more than another star.

"You're not coming back yet, are you?" Lanna asked quietly.

"No."

"So you think the ambassador's death might be related?"

"I'm not certain," Jason said. "Maybe. Something is bothering me, Lanna."

"About the murder?"

"No. About our scientist. Something about Denise is... wrong."

“What?”

Jason paused. “I’m not sure. She learned to walk and talk too quickly, for one thing.”

Lanna didn’t respond immediately. “I’m not certain what to tell you,” she finally said.

Jason sighed, shaking his head. He didn’t really understand what he meant either. He stood quietly for a moment, watching the flow of people on a walkway a short distance away. Something was wrong—he couldn’t decide what it was, but he knew what he feared. For over a century, the PC had maintained a monopoly on cyto. He didn’t expect psychic ability to remain confined to the PC—in fact, it was his ultimate goal that it not be. The very thing he was working toward was what he feared.

“Jason,” Lanna asked, “have you ever worried that what we’re doing is wrong?”

“Every day.”

“I mean,” Lanna continued, “what if they’re right? The tenasi, the varvax, and the rest—they’re all much older than humankind is. They know more than we do. Maybe they’re right—maybe humankind will become civilized before it obtains FTL travel. Maybe by holding cyto back from them, we’re keeping ourselves from progressing as we should.”

Jason stood quietly beside the balcony, listening to the sound of children running on the walkway below. *Children, laughing...*

“Lanna,” he said, “do you know how the Interspecies Monitoring Coalition rates a race’s intelligence class?”

“No.”

“They look at the race’s children,” Jason said quietly. “The older ones. Children who have lived just long enough to begin imitating the society they see around them, children who have lost the innocence of youth but haven’t yet replaced it with the tact and mores of adulthood. In those children, you can see what a species is really like. From them, the varvax determine whether a species is civilized or barbaric.”

“And we failed that test,” Lanna said.

“Miserably.”

“That’s all right,” Lanna said. “Every race fails it during the early part of their growth. We’ll get there eventually.”

“The tenasi had barely begun using steam power when they made their first FTL jump,” Jason said. “The varvax weren’t far behind them—they still didn’t have computers. Both species traveled to other planets before they learned to send a shuttle into space.”

Lanna fell quiet.

“We’ve been in space for nearly three centuries now,” Jason continued. “The varvax say that technology isn’t the way—they claim that technological development has boundaries, but that a sentient mind is limitless. But... still I worry. I worry that humankind will find a way, somehow. We always have before.”

“And so you play watchdog,” Lanna said.

Jason stood for a moment. “‘The few, so cleans’d, to these abodes repair,’” he finally said in a quiet voice. “‘And breathe, in ample fields, the soft Elysian air. Then are they happy, when by length of time, The scurf is worn away of each committed crime; No speck is left of their habitual stains, But the pure ether of the soul remains.’”

“Homer?” Lanna asked.

“Virgil.” Above, beyond the buildings, beyond the air, Jason could sense the specks of starlight in the sky. “Space is Elysium, Lanna. The place where heroes go when they die. The varvax and the others, they’ve fought and bled, just like we have. They finally overcame all of that—they paid their price and have earned their peace. I want to make certain their paradise remains such.”

“By playing God?”

Jason fell silent. He didn’t know how to reply, so he didn’t. He simply stood, Sensing the paradise above and Evensong below.



**COLN RIFLED THROUGH** the in-room bar, searching for something to drink. He wasn't normally prone to drinking, but normally he wasn't facing the loss of his job and probable imprisonment. Eventually, he poured himself a small glass of scotch and made his way out onto the balcony.

He paused halfway out the door. Jason Write stood leaning on his own balcony a short distance away. The man didn't look over, but Coln still felt as if he were being watched.

*Don't let him intimidate you,* Coln told himself. He turned away from Write indifferently and leaned against his own balcony railing.

Coming after Write had seemed like such a good idea at first. Coln had been frustrated at the Bureau's lack of information. They knew the PC was hiding technology from them, but they had no clue what it was. They knew Write had something integral to do with the PC's operations, but they weren't sure why. They wanted to keep trailing him, but they'd made too many promises. The Bureau had been ready to just leave Write alone.

Coln sighed, taking a sip of his drink. He'd picked the wrong mission. Write planned to leave within the day, taking the unfortunate scientist with him. And then Coln would be left by himself, a fugitive and a fool.

## 12

**"THAT KID IS** a fool," Lanna said.

"I know," Jason mumbled. "But at least he has passion. And courage."

"Not courage—brashness."

"Call it what you will," Jason said, Sensing the young UIB agent standing a short distance away.

"What's more," Lanna continued, "he may have passion, but that passion is hatred of you. I've been doing some searching. It appears that you were the focus of several of his research projects back when he was an undergraduate. None of his conclusions were flattering, old man. You should read some of these things..."

Lanna continued to speak, but Jason's mind drifted. His thoughts kept coming back to Denise. Who had taken her, and what had they done?

*She doesn't understand violence*, Jason thought. She didn't understand violence, and she hadn't ever tasted salt. She spoke oddly, in a way that was almost familiar. She couldn't walk or use her muscles. It was almost...

Jason took in a sharp, surprised breath.

*Almost as if she's accustomed to another body.*

"What?" Lanna demanded.

"Denise Carlson is dead," he said.

"What! What happened to her?"

Jason was silent for a moment.

"Jason! What happened!"

Jason ignored her, turning and walking back into his room. He strode out into the hallway, then made his way to the room beside his own—not Coln’s, but on the other side. He threw open the door, not bothering to knock.

Denise sat up with surprise, but relaxed when she realized who he was. Jason strode past her without saying a word, walking to her room’s control panel. He entered a few commands, and the light in the room grew far brighter, the bulbs turning slightly red in color.

“How is that?” he asked, turning to her.

Denise regarded him with confusion. “It’s nice. It feels right for some reason.”

Jason nodded once. In his mind the light was a virtual roar.

“Please,” Denise said, holding her hands forward. “Tell to me what you are doing.” Hands forward in the varvax gesture of supplication. He should have seen it sooner.

“Jason, you’re freaking me out,” Lanna said in his ear.

“This isn’t Denise Carlson,” Jason said quietly.

“What? Who is it?”

“Its name is Vahnn,” Jason explained.

Suddenly, Coln pushed his way into the room. He immediately shielded his eyes from the light—light that imitated a harsh, hot sun, one that required a strong crystalline carapace to provide protection.

“What are you doing, you maniac!” Coln said, pushing past Jason and altering the controls to the room. Then he turned to Denise. “Are you all right?”

“I...” Denise said. “Yes, why would I not be?”

Coln turned harsh eyes toward Jason. Then he paused, frowning.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Write?” Coln demanded.

“Like what?”

Coln shivered. “Your eyes... it’s like you’re looking past me. Like...”

Jason reached unconsciously for his face, feeling for sunglasses that weren’t there. He had forgotten he wasn’t wearing them. He turned from the room in shame, rushing out into the hallway.

*I mustn't let him see—mustn't let him know. He'll mock me. He'll laugh...*

Coln stayed behind, watching with confusion as he knelt beside the creature that had the body of a woman and the mind of an alien.

# 13

**"IT'S NOT POSSIBLE,"** Lanna said.

"They said that about psionics years ago," Jason said, striding down a walkway outside the hotel.

"But it's just so..."

"So what?"

Lanna sighed in frustration. "All right, let's assume you're correct. Who would do such a thing? Why switch someone's mind for an alien's? What good would it do them?"

"The varvax are the most developed cytonics in the galaxy," Jason said, speaking quietly as he passed people on Evensong's dark streets.

"So?"

"So," Jason said, "what could you learn if you could spend a few years in a varvax's head? What if you could get into a varvax body somehow and infiltrate their society? Someone tried to get hold of a varvax host—but something went wrong. The body they stole was killed, or perhaps the transfer went awry. They disposed of the varvax body afterward and left Denise wandering the streets."

"But why Denise?"

Jason paused. "I don't know. Maybe she was one of them—a spy of some sort. When a better opportunity came along, she took it."

"That's weak reasoning, old man."

"I know," Jason admitted. "But I can't think of anything else right now. All I know is that the woman back in my rooms is not human. She acts like

a varvax, thinks like a varvax, and gestures like a varvax.”

“She speaks English,” Lanna pointed out.

“Many varvax study English,” Jason said. “Or at least understand it. They find spoken languages interesting. Besides, maybe her body retained a residual understanding of speech and motion.”

“Maybe,” Lanna said, sounding unconvinced. “Where are you going?”

“You’ll see.” Jason continued on his way for a short distance until he came to the mental hospital. He strode in, and the same nurse sat behind the desk. She raised an eyebrow at him, confused and a little disapproving.

Jason ignored her, striding into the facility itself.

“Sir!” she called. “You can’t go in there! Sir, you don’t have...” Her voice trailed off, but soon she began calling for security.

“The nurse?” Lanna said, listening. “You’re back at the hospital? So, you’ve finally admitted that you’re insane and decided to commit yourself?”

Orderlies, nurses, and even some patients began to look into the hallway. *He’d better be here*, Jason thought. Just after the thought occurred to him, he sensed a familiar face peeking out of one of the rooms.

“Alert the Evensong Police Department, Lanna,” Jason said. “They’re about to get a report of a madman attacking one of the orderlies in this hospital. Please tell them to ignore it.”

“Jason, you are a very strange man.”

Jason smiled, then spun and burst into the room. Several orderlies jumped back in surprise at Jason’s entrance—the buzzing white room was some kind of employee lounge. The orderly, the one Jason had seen at the café, immediately turned to run. Jason jumped forward and snatched the man with one hand, then spun him around.

The man struggled, but a knee to the groin stopped that. Jason pulled off his glasses, then grabbed the man’s head with both hands and turned it toward him.

“Who sent you?” Jason asked, staring at the man with his sightless eyes.

The man stared back defiantly.

“Ah, I see,” Jason said, holding the man’s head in both of his hands.

“Yes, I can read your thoughts easily. Very interesting. Ah, and yes. So they

switched minds, did they? I didn't know that was possible. Thank you, you've been very informative."

Jason released the surprised man's head.

Lanna snorted in his ear. "Jason, unless you've been hiding some strange powers for a very long time, that was the biggest load of lies I've ever heard."

"Yes," Jason said, replacing his glasses and striding out of the room. "But they don't know that."

"What's the point?" Lanna asked.

"Be patient," Jason chided, holding up his hands as security guards entered the hallway. "I was just leaving," he said, then pushed past them and left the hospital.

## 14

**BACK AT THE** hotel, Jason gathered Denise and Coln in his room. One regarded him with customary wide-eyed confusion, the other with equally customary hostility. Jason removed his pin and handed it to Coln.

“There is a ship chartered for Jupiter Fourteen,” Jason said. “Be on it when it leaves, and take Denise with you. Go to the PC office, and they will protect you from the Bureau.”

“What about you, Write?” Coln asked suspiciously.

“If I’m right, I should be going somewhere else in a bit. You should get moving—the ship leaves in less than an hour.”

Coln frowned. Jason could sense the apprehension in his face. He didn’t want to accept the PC’s help, but he also didn’t want to face the Bureau’s justice. Hopefully, he would see to Denise’s safety.

After a short internal debate, Coln nodded and stood. “I’ll do it, Write. But first answer one question for me.”

“What?”

“Do you have what everyone says you do?”

Jason frowned. “Have what?”

“FTL engines,” Coln said. “Does the PC have the technology to create them or not? Have you been withholding the secret of FTL travel from the rest of humankind?”

Jason paused. “You’re asking the wrong question,” he finally said.

Coln’s expression darkened. “I knew you wouldn’t answer,” he said, turning toward Denise’s chair. “Come on, Denise.”



She didn't move. She slumped in her chair, eyes closed.

"Denise!" Coln said urgently, kneeling beside her. She appeared to be breathing, but...

Jason began to feel light-headed, and he noticed a faint scent in the air. He cursed quietly, turning to dash across the room. He stumbled halfway to the door, losing his balance. He barely even felt himself hit the ground.

*They work fast. Must have already been prepared to gas us...*

# 15

**JASON AWOKE TO** blackness. Pure, horrifying blackness. There was no sight, no Sense, no feelings at all. The darkness had returned.

Jason began to shake. *No! It can't be! Where is my Sense!* He curled up, barely feeling the cold metallic floor beneath him. The blackness swallowed him—it was more than just darkness, it was a nothingness. A lack of sensation. It was the one true terror in Jason's life. And it had returned.

He whimpered despite himself, memories flooding in.

It had started with his night vision, as visual diseases often did. He remembered the nights spent in bed as a child, the darkness seeming to grow more and more oppressive. And then it had started to come during the day. First his peripheral vision—it had been like the darkness was following him, enveloping him. Each morning when he awoke, it had seemed that the darkness was closer. It had crouched like a beast in the corner of his vision.

Terror. The doctors had been able to do nothing. Jason had been forced to try and live his life as normal, the darkness seeming to grow closer every moment. He had lived in perpetual fear of what must come.

And then there had been the children. The other children, who hadn't understood. He had tried to go on as usual, tried to live his life as if nothing were wrong. He should have admitted it to them. As it was, they saw only a stumbling fool. They had laughed. Oh, how they had laughed.

Jason screamed, as if yelling could push back the darkness. Where was his Sense? What was wrong? He flailed in the darkness, his fingers brushing a wall. He pulled back into a corner, frightened and confused.

“How did you do it?” a voice asked from above.

Jason looked up, but didn’t see, or Sense, anything.

“Tell me, Mister Write,” the voice demanded. “Can you read minds? This is impossible of cyto—even the varvax cannot penetrate an individual’s thoughts. How did you do it?”

Jason didn’t respond. The darkness. The blackness.

*I did this on purpose, a piece of Jason’s mind thought. I baited them. I wanted to get their attention, so they would bring me to them. They did. This is what I wanted.*

But... the darkness.

“How!” Jason croaked. “How have you taken it away?”

“Answer my questions, Mister Write,” the voice said, “and I will return your Sense. How did you read that man’s mind?”

Jason shuddered, pulling back against the cold telanium. The man’s voice was harsh and guttural. He spoke oddly—with an accent of some sort, but not one that Jason recognized.

*It’s not permanent, Jason told himself. The darkness will go away. Just like it did when you developed cyto.*

“I am not a patient man, Mister Write,” the voice warned. “Speak, and I will let your companions live.”

*Coln, Denise. They were in the room with me.*

Jason didn’t answer. He sat, breathing deeply, struggling to remain sane. Ever since he had developed cyto, he had never been in darkness. His Sense worked even when there was no light.

“Lanna?” Jason whispered, feeling the darkness advance on him. “Lanna!”

“The link to your home base has been cut, Mister Write,” the voice said.

Jason whimpered. The darkness seemed to be growing closer—closer to devouring his mind.

“As you wish, Mister Write,” the voice said. “I will give you three minutes. If you don’t have an answer for me by then, the woman dies.”

A click, then silence. It seemed worse without the voice—suddenly Jason wished he had kept the man talking. He wished he had told the voice the truth, that he couldn’t read minds. Anything to keep someone else there.

Now he had no one.

*I can't do this!* Jason thought. *Anything but this. I lived this horror once. I can't do it again!*

He tried to push out with mindblades, but nothing happened.

*Be calm, Jason. Control yourself. The varvax said something about this.* Sonn had said it once. He had been reserved and uncomfortable—odd for a varvax. Jason had asked if there was a way to suppress cytonic ability. Sonn had eventually admitted there was, but had told Jason he wouldn't need it. Not yet.

The darkness...

*No! Stay focused. You don't have time for fear.* There was probably a technological aspect to the suppressant device. Many cytonic abilities had mechanical halves—like the FTL comm feed, which wouldn't work without physical receivers. The cytonic behind his imprisonment would be feeding part of his mental energy into a physical device, one that used electricity to amplify the effect. But because of that augmentation, Jason would never be able to break free. He would be trapped forever in the blackness.

*Not forever. Just another few minutes, until they kill me.* That would almost be preferable.

An image came to him. An image of humankind escaping into space. An image of human merchants trading and cheating, of human tyrants capturing the technologically inferior varvax, tenasi, and hommar. Images of wars, of fighting, of a paradise destroyed.

*I can't let that happen!*

But, what could he do? He felt along the wall, stumbling to his feet and feeling his way around the room. It was small, perhaps two meters square. He could barely feel the seal of the door—there wasn't a handle on his side.

*There's not enough time!* Jason thought with desperation. *I can't escape, I can't contact Lanna—*

He couldn't contact Lanna, but... He reached up to his ear, tapping at the control disk. They had broken his link to the home base, but perhaps they hadn't thought of stowaways...

## 16

**"YOU WON'T GET** away with this!" Coln screamed to the empty room. "I'm a UIB agent. There are serious repercussions for the imprisonment of a law enforcement officer!"

There was no answer. Coln sighed, his rage weakening before sheer boredom. He had awakened in this room, which appeared to be some sort of storage closet, with a headache. He hadn't heard a thing outside the door since that time. Denise was there too, sitting quietly on a box.

*What is Write planning?* Coln thought. *He had us captured, but why?* It had to have something to do with the PC master plan, whatever that was.

Suddenly a sound crackled in his ear. "Coln?" The voice croaked sickly—like whispers from the lips of a dead man.

"Write?" Coln asked. "Why did you imprison me!"

"Hush, Coln," the voice whispered. "We are both imprisoned. We are going to die unless you can do something."

"Something?" Coln asked suspiciously. "What?"

"You need to knock out the power. Blow a fuse, overload a circuit—do something."

Coln frowned. "What good will that do? They'll have backups."

"Just do it." The link crackled off.

Coln swore quietly. What was Write planning this time? Dared he trust the man? Dared he do otherwise?

Denise watched with confusion as Coln searched through the small room, pushing aside boxes and carts. Eventually, he found a power jack on

the wall. He stood for a moment, regarding it. Finally, he sighed and loosed a piece of steel from a nearby box's constraint. *Why not? It's not like I can get into more trouble than I'm already in.*

**JASON COULDN'T ESCAPE** the darkness. He couldn't shut his eyes against it, he couldn't run away from it, and he couldn't ignore it. He could only huddle against the wall, feeling his resolve—and his sanity—grow weaker by the second. He heard, but didn't understand, the voice when it returned. His captors had made a grave mistake. They could make all the demands they wanted, but he was in no condition to respond to them. They could kill him. It wouldn't matter.

The voice screamed at him. Jason felt his sanity slipping. He couldn't struggle against it. He didn't want to struggle against it. Struggling would be far too difficult. Blissful unconsciousness was the only answer—a silencing of thought and perception.

At that moment, his Sense returned.

It was only a blip—a fractional waver in the power level. But it was enough. Sense flooded into Jason like drugs into an addict's veins. It immediately began to fade, the suppressor coming back on line.

Jason blasted out a thousand mindblades at once, shredding the walls around him. He shattered the telanium into chunks, the chunks to chips, and the chips to dust. The walls dissolved like tissue paper before a nuclear blast, spraying grains of metal away from him. He screamed as he let out the surge of power, a bestial yell to push back the darkness.

The suppressor immediately fell dead, its mechanisms destroyed by the blast. Jason lay huddled, his suit stained with dirt and sweat, on a bright telanium floor. He reveled in his returned Sense for a wonderful, silent

moment. However, with Sense came sanity—the two were inseparable to him.

*There is another cytonic here, and he's not going to be pleased that I've escaped.*

So, taking a deep breath, Jason forced himself to stand.



## 18

**COLN SAT, STUNNED.** He held a piece of rubber in his hand—the very one he had used to grip the metal as he’d rammed it into the power jack. He had expected a slight reaction; he hadn’t expected the room next to his own to explode.

Coln blinked, dusting the silvery telanium flakes off his clothes. *What... ?* he thought with amazement, rubbing some of the telanium grains between his fingers. *What could have done this?* Modern weaponry had difficulty even scarring telanium.

He looked up, and saw Jason Write standing in the direct center of the explosion. The operative’s suit was torn. Coln let the telanium dust trickle from his stunned fingers as he saw Write’s eyes. Like before, they were unfocused, even unresponsive. They stared dully forward, motionless, like the eyes of... a blind man.

“What are you?” Coln whispered.

Write ignored the question. “Take the girl and go,” he said, his voice calm but ominous. “This area is about to become very dangerous.”

Coln nodded, reaching for the frightened Denise’s hand. At that moment, a new voice spoke—one Coln didn’t recognize.

“Oh, come now, Mister Write,” the voice said. “Must we stoop to such assumptions? Are we not... civilized?”

Write didn’t turn toward the source of the sound—a speaker on the wall. “Show yourself.”

There was silence. The sound of footsteps. Coln pushed Denise behind him, turning wary eyes on the hallway outside their rooms—the hallway that was now exposed, thanks to the strange explosion.

A figure appeared in the hallway. He was nondescript save for a long nose and a thin body. He wore a sharp navy suit, and he was smiling as he strolled forward, scuffing the layer of telanium dust.

“Tell me who you are,” Write said, turning to face the man with his unfocused eyes.

“Come, Jason,” the man said. “Don’t you recognize me?”

“No.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” the man said, continuing to stroll around the room. “It has been several years, and I really wasn’t all that important. Just one of your many recruits. My name was Edmund.”

The room fell silent. “Why did you try to kill Coln?” Write finally asked.

Edmund just smiled. “Even for a PC agent, you’re an extremely secretive man, Jason. You’ve been hiding things from the varvax. If they knew that you could create mindblades, they’d certainly be tempted to elevate humankind’s intelligence designation.”

Write frowned. “It was a test. You wanted to see if I could stop the bullets.”

“And I was not disappointed,” Edmund said, stopping just in front of Write. “Mindblades are very advanced, Jason. Another few decades of study, and you might get FTL. I’m impressed.”

The two men stood facing each other—yet neither one’s eyes focused on his opponent. They remained like that for a tense few moments, and Coln frowned. He felt like something important was on the verge of happening, but it never occurred.

*What is going on?*

## 19

**JASON FOUGHT FOR** his life. Hundreds of mindblades whipped toward him, invisible blasts of pure thought. It was all he could do to keep them from shredding his flesh. He fought back, sending his own mindblades to block those of his opponent—an opponent he still didn't understand.

He vaguely remembered Edmund—though he hadn't known his face well enough to recognize him in the café. Edmund had been a man with some cytonic potential. He had run away from the PC after just a few months of training. That had been only two years ago—how had he learned so much in such little time?

The barrage of mindblades slackened, and Edmund stepped back. He was still smiling, but there was reservation in his eyes. He hadn't expected Jason to be as good as he was.

Jason breathed deeply. Coln was watching from a short distance away, his face confused—he hadn't been able to see the insane battle Jason had just fought.

"I'm impressed again, Jason," Edmund said.

Jason felt sweat trickle down his cheek.

"I wouldn't have expected you to know how to block mindblades," Edmund continued. "Few of us have practiced that."

Jason stood stiffly. "I've been expecting this for some time," he whispered. "I knew I couldn't keep it away from people like you. I knew that someday I would have to fight."

"You prepared well."

The mindblades struck again. Jason grunted, whipping out with his own blades. There was a faint ripple to his Sense when a mindblade was about to appear, and he sliced at that area with a blade of his own. The blasts canceled each other out, wavering in his Sense like two curves of light. He blocked hundreds of them, the air around him shining like he was in the middle of an explosion.

*I can't keep this up long.* Eventually a mindblade would break through. Jason had only one card to play—he would have to make it count.

Jason continued to fight, waiting for the right time. Edmund was better than Jason was. It shouldn't have been possible—Jason had been practicing cyto longer than any other man. How could someone have overtaken him so quickly? Jason had to find out. Otherwise, all he had worked for would be lost.

The attack retreated again. Edmund was perspiring now—at least it was difficult for him.

“You learned from the varvax well,” Jason said, gambling.

Edmund looked up with surprise. Then he laughed. “So you can't read minds after all,” he said with a smile. “That was quite the bluff.”

*I was wrong, Jason thought. But, how then...?*

“Goodbye, Jason Write.”

Jason felt the air waver around him. More mindblades than he could count began to form—it was like he was being circled in a dome of pure energy. He couldn't block them all. He would die.

*Now!*

Jason focused on himself. He didn't raise any mindblades. Instead, he Sensed inward. He felt his own vibration in his Sense, a cool black-clothed creature. So different from the boy he had once been. The boy had been stupefied, made immobile, by his horror.

Jason was no longer that boy. With a scream, he felt the mindblades descend around him, and he threw himself willingly into the darkness.

All was still.

The blackness enveloped him, the nonexistence that had threatened him since childhood. Except this time he had come to it by choice. He suffocated for an eternal moment in its embrace.

Then he reappeared. As he reentered normal space, he pushed the air away, lest its molecules get trapped within his appearing body. In a similar manner, he pushed Edmund's flesh away from his hand.

The world shook, and Jason was back. He stood with his arm extended directly in front of Edmund. Jason's wrist ended abruptly where it met Edmund's flesh—his hand had materialized inside of the man's chest.

Edmund's heart, gripped in Jason's fist, thumped once. Edmund's eyes stared ahead in shock. Behind, the place where Jason had been a moment earlier exploded with mindblades.

Jason squeezed once, and Edmund cried out in pain. The heart stopped beating. Edmund slid to his knees, and Jason pushed his hand slightly outside space and withdrew it.

Edmund fell backward, staring with surprised, agonized eyes. He didn't fall unconscious as he died—he was far too powerful a cytonic for that. Instead, he just whispered.

"FTL transmission. Jason, you surprise me again. We had no idea..."

Jason knelt beside the man. "I've had it for some time. Tell me. Tell me how you did it. Where did you learn such powers?"

The man laughed, a pained hacking laugh. "I've studied it all my life, Jason."

"How?" Jason demanded.

Somehow, Edmund met Jason's eyes. "Ah, you're such an idealist, Jason of the Phone Company. Sometime, you must ask yourself this. Why would a race such as the varvax need to learn an ability such as cytonic suppression?"

Jason paused, his mind growing numb. He knew only one answer, one he had barely dared consider. "To keep prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Edmund coughed. "Original thinkers! Dissenters! Anyone who doesn't agree with them."

"You lie!"

Edmund laughed, his back arching in pain. "And you will be our escape," he said, his voice growing loud until he was practically screaming. "They've had their paradise long enough. You nearly went mad after

spending just a few minutes without your Sense—imagine living your life in such a box! You see only the peace, you see only the perfect society.

“You don’t see the price!”

Edmund’s final breath hissed out, and his body fell limp.

“You lie,” Jason whispered. “They are a peaceful people. We are the monsters, not them...” He sat for a moment, regarding the fallen body. Coln still stood a short distance away, looking amazed—and confused.

“Come here,” Jason said quietly. “Bring the girl.”

Coln obeyed without a word. Jason put a hand on each of them, then he entered the darkness once again.

## 20

**COLN RECOGNIZED THE** room immediately. He blinked once, trying to forget about the awful sense of emptiness he had just experienced. He was in a white, curved room—the operations center of PC headquarters. The room pictured in his fuzzy holovid. Coln had studied its image hundreds of times, and now he was actually there.

Except PC Central Operations was on Earth, months away from Evensong. Coln breathed in with surprise. Write stood at a short distance, his suit tattered, blood seeping down his arms.

“You do have FTL travel!” Coln accused.

“Yes.”

“Then I was right!” Coln said. “You’ve been keeping FTL travel from humankind!”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Coln demanded. “What are you trying to protect us from?”

“I wasn’t trying to protect *us*,” Write said, walking over to the side of the room. He approached the wall—the one that was supposed to house the FTL communication machinery—and pulled a lever. A small cup popped out at the bottom, followed by a stream of steaming coffee. “I was trying to protect them. And prepare us.”

“Prepare us?” Coln asked.

“The exchange programs,” Write said. “The outreach programs—even the skin-color fad. Anything to make us more open-minded. Of course, it doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

Coln frowned, then eyed the coffee machine. “So it’s not the FTL comm unit...”

Write shook his head, then pointed to the side. A man, the man Coln had mistaken for a security guard in the holovid, sat quietly in a chair a short distance away. The man had his eyes closed.

“His mind,” Write said. “It powers all of the FTL calls.”

“But,” Coln said, “there are millions of them...”

“All you need is one mind to provide the FTL capability,” Jason explained. “Computers can do the actual routing.”

Coln hissed quietly in surprise.

“Technology is limited,” Jason said. “Only the mind is infinite.”

Further questions were forestalled as the door to the room slammed open and a red-haired woman burst into the room. She immediately ran forward and grabbed Write in a powerful embrace. “What happened!” she demanded, and Coln instantly recognized Lanna’s voice.

“Coln,” Write mumbled, “meet Lanna Write. My wife.”

“What? Your *wife*?”

“Unfortunately,” Write said. There was fondness in his voice.

“But,” Coln objected, “the Bureau has bugged your communications dozens of times—you always complain when she’s assigned to you!”

“Yes, and he does the assigning,” Lanna said, checking the small wounds on Write’s arms. “He always says that the less the Bureau knows about his personal life, the better. Besides, he can’t help teasing me.” She looked up at Write. “All right, sit down and tell me what’s going on. The medic is on his way.”

Write sighed, taking another sip of his drink. “I might have been wrong, Lanna.”

“About what?”

“About everything,” he said, his voice haunted.



## 21

**JASON SAT IN** his quarters, letting the medic bandage his arms. Lanna stood, dissatisfied, a short distance away. She was the terror of PC Central Operations—few men had the courage, or the stupidity, to incur her wrath.

“All right, old man,” she said. “What happened?”

Jason shook his head. Before he could reply, his holovid beeped. Jason punched the button, and Sonn’s chitinous face appeared.

“You have some explaining to do, Sonn,” Jason said.

The varvax put forward his hands in supplication. “I am at your disposal, Jason of the Phone Company.”

Jason pushed a button, showing Sonn an image of Denise being questioned by PC operatives. “Tell me it’s not true, Sonn,” Jason pled quietly. “Tell me you don’t lock your discontents away.”

“Varvax discontents?” Lanna asked with surprise.

Sonn raised his hands, a sign of apology. “I said that you would discover the reason for cytonic suppression eventually, Jason of the Phone Company.”

Jason bowed his head. *No. It can’t be...*

“It is the only way,” Sonn said. “The way to have peace.”

“Peace for those who agree with you,” Jason spat.

“It is the only way.”

“And the others?” Jason demanded. “The tenasi, the hallo?”

“The same,” Sonn said. “They have discovered the way, as you will eventually. The way to Prime Intelligence. I must apologize for the

inconvenience we have given to you.”

Jason sat, stunned. He was wrong. All of these years, over a century of work, and he was wrong. They had deceived him. Suddenly, he felt sick—sick, and angry.

“They’re going to come for you, Sonn,” Jason said, nodding thankfully to the medic as he finished the bandaging. The man was trustworthy—one of the first cytonics Jason had recruited over a hundred years before.

“Excuse me, Jason of the Phone Company?” Sonn asked after a short pause. His hands were pulled back in the varvax sign of confusion.

The medic left and Lanna sat down beside Jason. She watched Sonn with calculating eyes—she had never liked the varvax. She said she didn’t like people who could so easily falsify their body language.

“The ambassador—the one who died,” Jason said. “He was a discontent. I have him now. I thought humans were trying to infiltrate varvax society; I didn’t realize that it was the other way around. Your dissidents are escaping, and they’re hiding among us. They’re trying to get hold of human technology. We’re still uncivilized, Sonn. We have some war machines that could blast down your ships without even pausing.”

Sonn maintained his sign of confusion, then augmented it with one of worry. Few people know that the tenasi ambassadorial vessel that had been shot down over Earth had been one of the most advanced, most powerful ships in the galaxy. A single human missile had destroyed it. The other species had far inferior technology.

“This is disturbing,” Sonn admitted.

“I know,” Jason said. Then he reached over and cut the connection. Sonn’s face fuzzed and disappeared.

Jason leaned back with a sigh, Sensing Lanna beside him. He’d known it was coming—he’d feared that he couldn’t keep humankind out of space. He just hadn’t expected heaven to fail him.

“I’m sorry,” Lanna whispered.

Jason shook his head. “You always warned me that I was too idealistic.”

“I wanted to believe you anyway,” Lanna said. She slowly trailed her hand along his cheek. “Do you think the one who attacked you was the only one?”

“Not a chance,” Jason said. “He was too confident.”

“Then...”

Jason took a deep breath. “Prepare a press release, Lanna. Tell them that the Phone Company has finally developed faster-than-light travel, and that we will release it to the public as soon as the United Governments approves our patent.”

Lanna nodded.

“Perhaps we can salvage something from paradise,” Jason whispered.

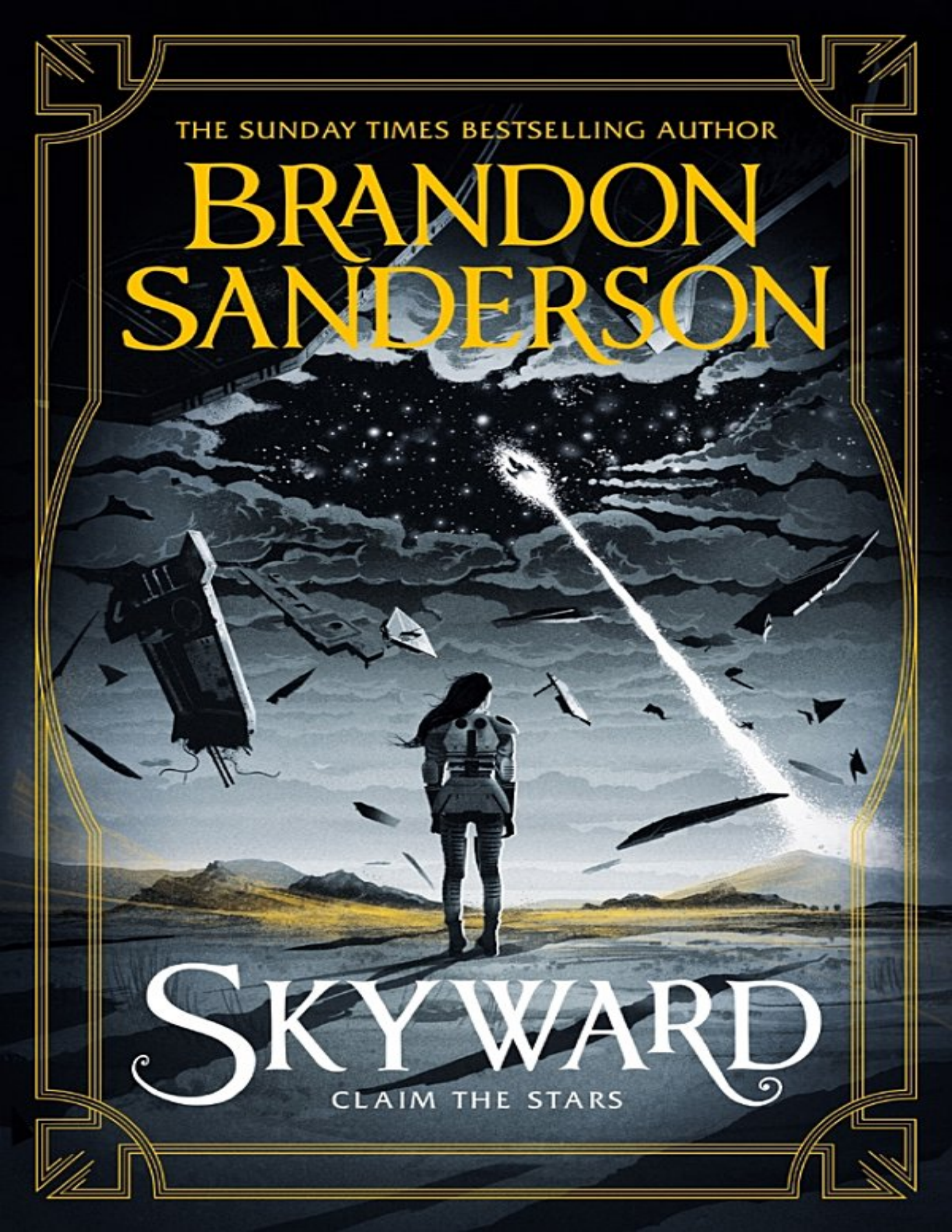
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# BRANDON SANDERSON



# SKYWARD

CLAIM THE STARS

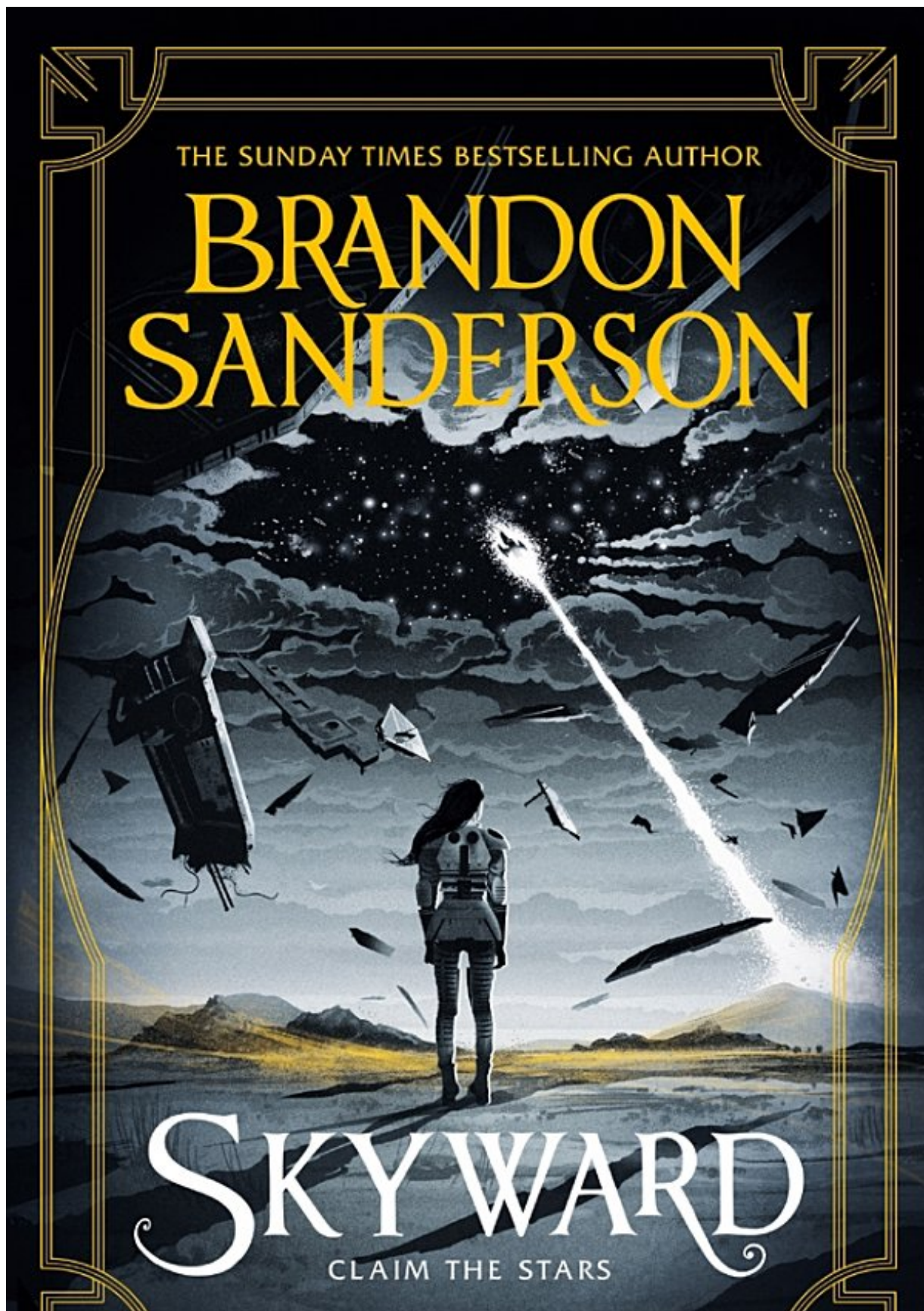


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CLAIM THE STARS





BRANDON  
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SKYWARD  
CLAIM THE STARS

GOLLANCZ  
LONDON



*For Karen Ahlstrom, who counts all the days  
that I forget*

# CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[MAP](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[PART ONE](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[PART TWO](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

17

18

19

### PART THREE

#### INTERLUDE

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

### PART FOUR

#### INTERLUDE

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

42

[43](#)

[44](#)

[45](#)

[46](#)

[47](#)

## [PART FIVE](#)

### [INTERLUDE](#)

[48](#)

[49](#)

[50](#)

[51](#)

[52](#)

[53](#)

[54](#)

[55](#)

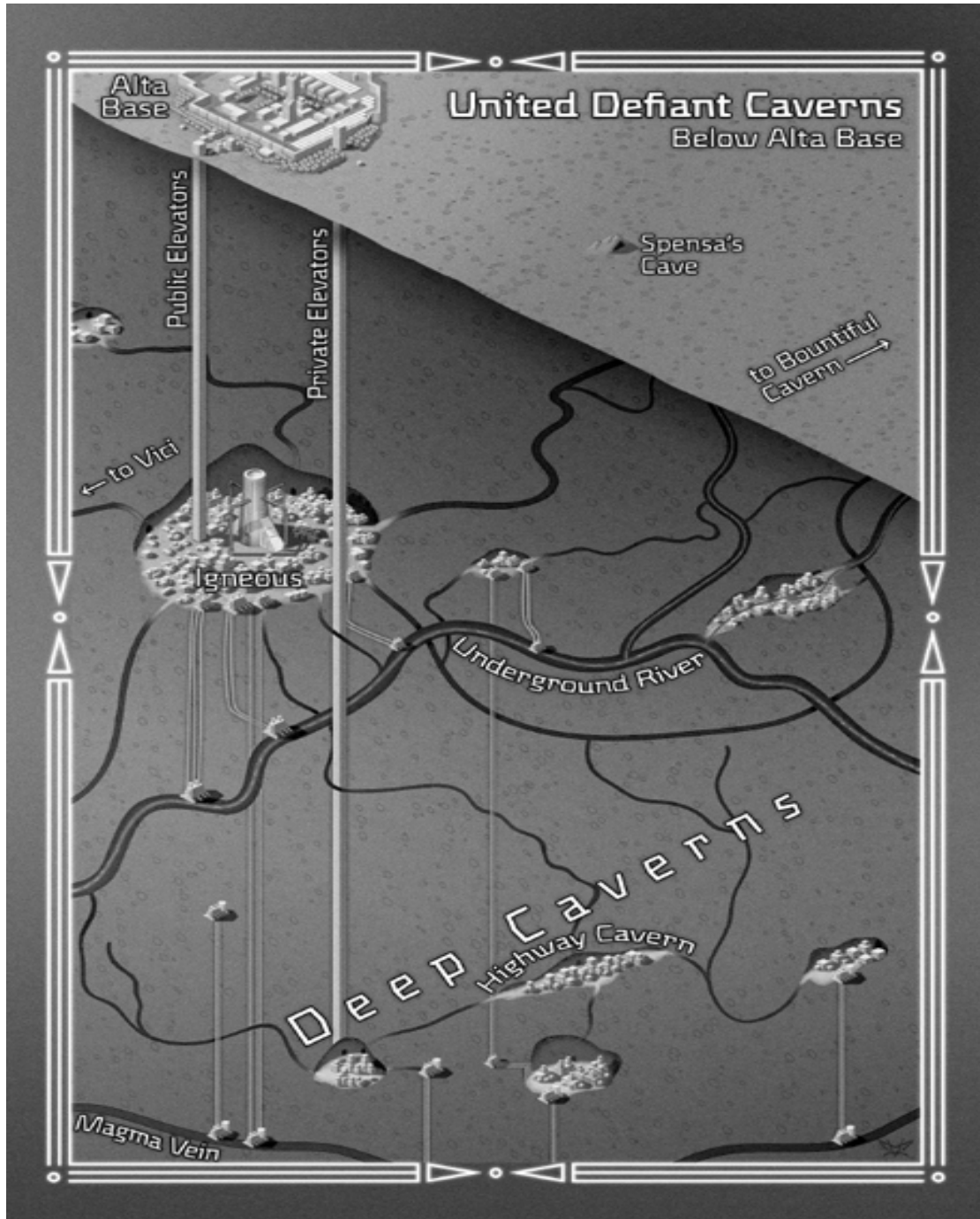
## [EPILOGUE](#)

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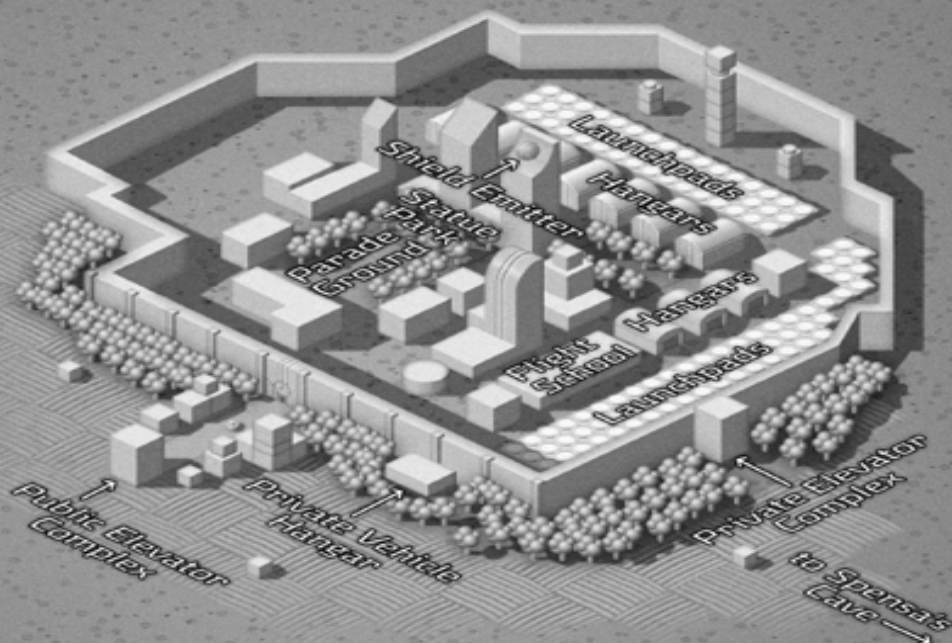
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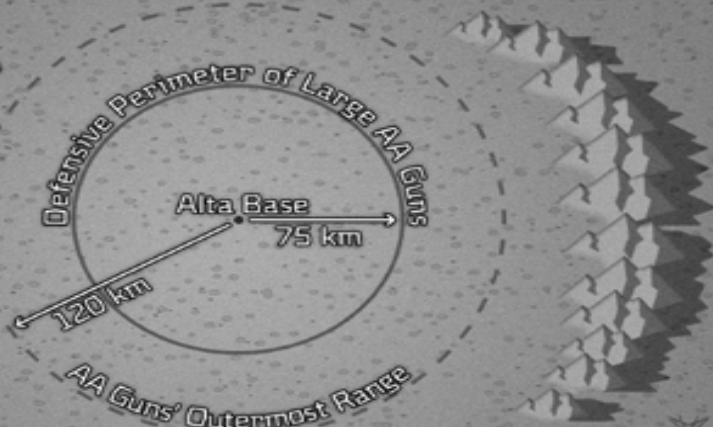
# MAP



## Alta Base



## Defensive Perimeter Surrounding Alta Base



## PROLOGUE

Only fools climbed to the surface. It was stupid to put yourself in danger like that, my mother always said. Not only were there near-constant debris showers from the rubble belt, but you never knew when the Krell would attack.

Of course, my father traveled to the surface basically every day—he had to, as a pilot. I supposed by my mother’s definition that made him *extra* foolish, but I always considered him extra *brave*.

I was still surprised when one day, after years of listening to me beg, he finally agreed to take me up with him.

I was seven years old, though in my mind I was completely grown-up and utterly capable. I hurried after my father, carrying a lantern to light the rubble-strewn cavern. A lot of the rocks in the tunnel were broken and cracked, most likely from Krell bombings—things I’d experienced down below as a rattling of dishes or trembling of light fixtures.

I imagined those broken rocks as the broken bodies of my enemies, their bones shattered, their trembling arms reaching upward in a useless gesture of *total and complete defeat*.

I was a very odd little girl.

I caught up to my father, and he looked back, then smiled. He had the *best* smile, so confident, like he never worried about what people said about him. Never worried that he was weird or didn’t fit in.

Then again, why should he have worried? *Everyone* liked him. Even people who hated ice cream and playing swords—even whiny little Rodge McCaffrey—liked my father.

Father took me by the arm and pointed upward. “Next part is a little tricky. Let me lift you.”

“I can do it,” I said, and shook off his hand. I was grown-up. I’d packed my own backpack *and* had left Bloodletter, my stuffed bear, at home. Stuffed bears were for babies, even if you’d fashioned your own mock power armor for yours out of string and broken ceramics.

Granted, I *had* put my toy starfighter in my backpack. I wasn’t crazy. What if we ended up getting caught in a Krell attack and they bombed our retreat, so we had to live out the rest of our lives as wasteland survivors, devoid of society or civilization?

A girl needed her toy starfighter with her just in case.

I handed my backpack to my father and looked up at the crack in the stones. There was . . . something about that hole up there. An unnatural light seeped through it, wholly unlike the soft glow of our lanterns.

*The surface . . . the sky!* I grinned and started climbing up a steep slope that was part rubble, part rock formation. My hands slipped and I scraped myself on a sharp edge, but I didn’t cry. The daughters of pilots did *not* cry.

The crack in the cavern roof looked a hundred meters away. I hated being so small. Any day now, I was going to grow tall like my father. Then for once I wouldn’t be the smallest kid around. I’d laugh at everyone from up so high, they’d be forced to admit how great I was.

I growled softly as I got to the top of a rock. The next hand-hold was out of reach. I eyed it. Then I jumped, determined. Like a good Defiant girl, I had the heart of a stardragon.

But I also had the body of a seven-year-old. So I missed by a good half meter.

A strong hand seized me before I could fall too far. My father chuckled, holding me by the back of my jumpsuit, which I’d painted with markers to look like his flight suit. I had even drawn a pin on the left over my heart, like the one he wore—the pin that marked him as a pilot. It was in the shape of a small starfighter with lines underneath.

Father pulled me onto the rock beside him, then reached out with his free hand and activated his light-line. The device looked like a metal bracelet, but once he engaged it by tapping two fingers against his palm, the band glowed with a bright molten light. He touched a stone above, and when he drew his hand back, it left a thick line of light like a shining rope fixed to the rock. He wrapped the other end around me so it fit snugly under my



arms, then detached it from his bracelet. The glow there faded, but the luminescent rope remained in place, attaching me to the rocks.

I'd always thought light-lines should burn to the touch, but it was just warm. Like a hug.

"Okay, Spin," he said, using my nickname. "Try it again."

"I don't *need* this," I said, plucking at the safety rope.

"Humor a frightened father."

"Frightened? You aren't frightened of anything. You fight *the Krell*."

He laughed. "I'd rather face a hundred Krell ships than your mother on the day I bring you home with a broken arm, little one."

"I'm *not* little. And if I break my arm, you can leave me here until I heal. I'll fight the beasts of the caverns and become feral and wear their skins and —"

"Climb," he said, still grinning. "You can fight the beasts of the caverns another time, though I think the only ones you'd find have long tails and buckteeth."

I had to admit, the light-line was helpful. I could pull against it to brace myself. We reached the crack, and my father pushed me up first. I grabbed the rim and scrambled out of the caverns, stepping onto the surface for the first time in my life.

It was so *open*.

I gaped, standing there, looking up at . . . at nothing. Just . . . just . . . *upness*. No ceiling. No walls. I'd always imagined the surface as a really, really big cavern. But it was so much more, and so much less, all at once.

*Wow.*

My father heaved himself up after me and dusted the dirt from his flight suit. I glanced at him, then back up at the sky. I grinned widely.

"Not frightened?" he asked.

I glared at him.

"Sorry," he said with a chuckle. "Wrong word. It's just that a lot of people find the sky intimidating, Spensa."

"It's beautiful," I whispered, staring up at that vast nothingness, air that extended up into an infinite greyness, fading to black.

The surface was still brighter than I'd imagined. Our planet, Detritus, was protected by several enormous layers of ancient space debris. Junk that was *way* up high, outside the air, in *space*. Wrecked space stations, massive

metal shields, old chunks of metal big as mountains—there were many layers of it, kind of like broken shells around the planet.

We hadn't built any of that. We'd crashed on this planet when my grandmother was a girl, and this stuff had been ancient then. Still, some of it worked. For example, the bottom layer—the one closest to the planet—had enormous glowing rectangles in it. I'd heard of those. Skylights: enormous floating lights that gave illumination and warmth to the planet.

There was supposed to be a lot of littler bits of junk up there too, particularly in the lowest layer. I squinted, trying to see if I could pick any of that out, but space was too far away. Other than the two nearby skylights—neither of which was directly above us—the only things I could see were some vague patterns up there in the greyness. Lighter chunks and darker chunks.

"The Krell live up there?" I asked. "Beyond the debris field?"

"Yes," Father said. "They fly down through the gaps in the layers to attack."

"How do they find us?" I asked. "There's so much *room* up here." The world seemed a much larger place than I'd imagined in the caverns below.

"They can somehow sense when people gather together," Father said. "Anytime the population of a cavern gets too big, the Krell attack and bomb it."

Decades ago, our people had been part of a fleet of space vessels. We'd been chased by the Krell to this planet and had crashed here, where we'd been forced to split up to survive. Now we lived in clans, each of whom could trace their lineage back to the crews of one of those starships.

Gran-Gran had told me these stories many times. We'd lived for seventy years here on Detritus, traveling the caverns as nomadic clans, afraid to congregate. Until now. Now we'd started to build starfighters and had made a hidden base on the surface. We were starting to fight back.

"Where's Alta Base?" I asked. "You said we'd come up near it. Is that it?" I pointed toward some suspicious rocks. "It's right there, isn't it? I want to go see the starfighters."

My father leaned down and turned me about ninety degrees, then pointed. "There."

"Where?" I searched the surface, which was basically all just blue-grey dust and rocks, with craters from fallen debris from the rubble belt. "I can't see it."

“That’s the point, Spensa. We have to remain hidden.”

“But you fight, don’t you? Won’t they eventually learn where the fighters are coming from? Why don’t you move the base?”

“We have to keep it here, above Igneous. That’s the big cavern I showed you last week.”

“The one with all the machines?”

He nodded. “Inside Igneous, we found manufactories; that’s what lets us build starships. We have to live nearby to protect the machinery, but we fly missions anywhere the Krell come down, anywhere they decide to bomb.”

“You protect other clans?”

“To me, there is only *one* clan that matters: humankind. Before we crashed here, we were all part of the same fleet—and someday all the wandering clans will remember that. They will come when we call them. They’ll gather together, and we’ll form a city and build a civilization again.”

“Won’t the Krell bomb it?” I asked, but cut him off before he could reply. “No. Not if we’re strong enough. Not if we stand and fight back.”

He smiled.

“I’m going to have my own ship,” I said. “I’m going to fly it just like you. And then nobody in the clan will be able to make fun of me, because I’ll be *stronger* than they are.”

My father looked at me for a moment before he spoke. “Is *that* why you want to be a pilot?”

“They can’t say you’re too small when you’re a pilot,” I said. “Nobody will think I’m weird, and I won’t get into trouble for fighting because my *job* will be *fighting*. They won’t call me names, and everyone will love me.”

*Like they love you.* I thought.

That made my father hug me for some stupid reason, even though I was just telling the truth. But I hugged him back, because parents liked stuff like that. Besides, it did feel good to have someone to hold. Maybe I shouldn’t have left Bloodletter behind.

Father’s breath caught, and I thought he might be crying, but it wasn’t that. “Spin!” he said, pointing toward the sky. “Look!”

Again I was struck by the expanse. *So BIG.*

Father was pointing at something specific. I squinted, noting that a section of the grey-black sky was darker than the rest. A hole through the layers of debris?

In that moment, I looked out into infinity. I found myself trembling as if a billion meteors had hit nearby. I could see space itself, with little pinpricks of white in it, different from the skylights. These sparkled, and seemed so, so far away.

“What are those lights?” I whispered.

“Stars,” he said. “I fly up near the debris, but I’ve almost never seen through it. There are too many layers. I’ve always wondered if I could get out to the stars.”

There was awe in his voice, a tone I’d never heard from him before.

“Is that . . . is that why you fly?” I asked.

My father didn’t seem to care about the praise the other members of the clan gave him. Strangely, he seemed *embarrassed* by it.

“We used to live out there, among the stars,” he whispered. “That’s where we belong, not in those caverns. The kids who make fun of you, they’re trapped on this rock. Their heads are heads of rock, their hearts set upon rock. Set *your* sights on something higher. Something more grand.”

The debris shifted, and the hole slowly shrank until all I could see was a single star brighter than the others.

“Claim the stars, Spensa,” he said.

I *was* going to be a pilot someday. I would fly up there and fight. I just hoped Father would leave some Krell for me.

I squinted as something flashed in the sky. A distant piece of debris, burning brightly as it entered the atmosphere. Then another fell, and another. Then dozens.

Father frowned and reached for his radio—a superadvanced piece of technology that was given only to pilots. He lifted the blocky device to his mouth. “This is Chaser,” he said. “I’m on the surface. I see a debris fall close to Alta.”

“We’ve spotted it already, Chaser,” a woman’s voice said over the radio. “Radar reports are coming in now, and . . . *Scud*. We’ve got Krell.”

“What cavern are they headed for?” Father asked.

“Their heading is . . . Chaser, they’re heading this way. They’re flying straight for Igneous. Stars help us. They’ve located the base!”

Father lowered his radio.

“Large Krell breach sighted,” the woman’s voice said through the radio. “Everyone, this is an emergency. *An extremely large group of Krell has breached the debris field*. All fighters report in. They’re coming for Alta!”

Father took my arm. "Let's get you back."

"They need you!" I said. "You've got to go fight!"

"I have to get you to—"

"I can get back myself. It was a straight trip through those tunnels."

Father glanced toward the debris again. "Chaser!" a new voice said over the radio. "Chaser, you there?"

"Mongrel?" Father said, flipping a switch and raising his radio. "I'm up on the surface."

"You need to talk some sense into Banks and Swing. They're saying we need to flee."

Father cursed under his breath, flipping another switch on the radio. A voice came through. "—aren't ready for a head-on fight yet. We'll be ruined."

"No," another woman said. "We have to stand and fight."

A dozen voices started talking at once.

"Ironsides is right," my father said into the line, and—remarkably—they all grew quiet.

"If we let them bomb Igneous, then we lose the apparatus," my father said. "We lose the manufactories. We lose everything. If we ever want to have a civilization again, a *world* again, we *have to stand here!*"

I waited, silent, holding my breath, hoping he would be too distracted to send me away. I trembled at the idea of a battle, but I still wanted to watch it.

"We fight," the woman said.

"We *fight*," said Mongrel. I knew him by name, though I hadn't met him. He was my father's wingmate. "Hot rocks, this is a good one. I'm going to beat you into the sky, Chaser! Just you watch how many I bring down!"

The man sounded eager, maybe a little too excited, to be heading into battle. I liked him immediately.

My father debated only a moment before pulling off his light-line bracelet and stuffing it into my hands. "Promise you'll go back straightaway."

"I promise."

"Don't dally."

"I won't."

He raised his radio. "Yeah, Mongrel, we'll see about that. I'm running for Alta now. Chaser out."

He dashed across the dusty ground in the direction he'd pointed earlier. Then he stopped and turned back. He pulled off his pin and tossed it—like a glittering fragment of a star—to me before continuing his run toward the hidden base.

I, of course, immediately broke my promise. I climbed down into the crack but hid there, clutching Father's pin, and watched until I saw the starfighters leave Alta and streak toward the sky. I squinted and picked out the dark Krell ships swarming down toward them.

Finally, showing a rare moment of good judgment, I decided I'd better do what my father had told me. I used the light-line to lower myself into the cavern, where I recovered my backpack and headed into the tunnels. I figured if I hurried, I could get back to my clan in time to listen to the broadcast of the fight on our single communal radio.

I was wrong though. The hike was longer than I remembered, and I did manage to get lost. So I was wandering down there, imagining the glory of the awesome battle happening above, when my father infamously broke ranks and fled from the enemy. His own flight shot him down in retribution. By the time I got home, the battle had been won, my father was gone.

And I'd been branded the daughter of a coward.

# PART ONE

# 1

I stalked my enemy carefully through the cavern.

I'd taken off my boots so they wouldn't squeak. I'd removed my socks so I wouldn't slip. The rock under my feet was comfortably cool as I took another silent step forward.

This deep, the only light came from the faint glow of the worms on the ceiling, feeding off the moisture seeping through cracks. You had to sit for minutes in the darkness for your eyes to adjust to that faint light.

Another quiver in the shadows. There, near those dark lumps that must be enemy fortifications. I froze in a crouch, listening to my enemy scratch the rock as he moved. I imagined a Krell: a terrible alien with red eyes and dark armor.

With a steady hand—agonizingly slow—I raised my rifle to my shoulder, held my breath, and fired.

A squeal of pain was my reward.

*Yes!*

I patted my wrist, activating my father's light-line. It sprang to life with a reddish-orange glow, blinding me for a moment.

Then I rushed forward to claim my prize: one dead rat, speared straight through.

In the light, shadows I'd imagined as enemy fortifications revealed themselves as rocks. My enemy was a plump rat, and my rifle was a makeshift speargun. Nine and a half years had passed since that fateful day when I'd climbed to the surface with my father, but my imagination was as strong as ever. It helped relieve the monotony, to pretend I was doing something more exciting than hunting rats.



I held up the dead rodent by its tail. “Thus you know the fury of my anger, fell beast.”

It turned out that strange little girls grow up to be strange young women. But I figured it was good to practice my taunts for when I *really* fought the Krell. Gran-Gran taught that a great warrior knew how to make a great boast to drive fear and uncertainty into the hearts of her enemies.

I tucked my prize away into my sack. That was eight so far—not a bad haul. Did I have time to find another?

I glanced at my light-line—the bracelet that housed it had a little clock next to the power indicator. 0900. Probably time to turn back; I couldn’t miss *too* much of the school day.

I slung my sack over my shoulder, picked up my speargun—which I’d fashioned from salvaged parts I’d found in the caverns—and started the hike homeward. I followed my own hand-drawn maps, which I was constantly updating in a small notebook.

A part of me was sad to have to return, and leave these silent caverns behind. They reminded me of my father. Besides, I liked how . . . empty it all was. Nobody to mock me, nobody to stare, nobody to whisper insults until I was forced to defend my family honor by burying a fist in their stupid face.

I stopped at a familiar intersection where the floor and ceiling gave way to strange metal patterns. Circular designs marked with scientific writing covered both surfaces; I’d always thought they must be ancient maps of the galaxy. On the far side of the room, an enormous, ancient tube emerged from the rock—one of many that moved water between the caverns, cleansing it and using it to cool machinery. A seam dripped water into a bucket I’d left, and it was half full, so I took a long drink. Cool and refreshing, with a tinge of something metallic.

We didn’t know much about the people who had built this machinery. Like the rubble belt, it had been here already when our small fleet crashed on the planet. They’d been humans, as the writings on places like this room’s ceiling and floor were in human languages. But how distantly related they were to us was a mystery even now. None of them were still around, and the melted patches and ancient wrecks on the surface indicated that they had suffered their own war.

I poured the rest of the water into my canteen, then gave the large tube a fond pat before replacing the bucket and moving on. The machinery seemed

to respond to me with a distant, familiar thrumming. I followed that sound and eventually approached a glowing break in the stone on my left.

I stepped up to the hole and looked out on Igneous. My home cavern and the largest of the underground cities that made up the Defiant League. My perch was high, providing me with a stunning view of a large cave filled with boxy apartments built like cubes splitting off one another.

My father's dream had come true. In defeating the Krell that day over nine years ago, those fledgling starfighter pilots had inspired a nation. Dozens of once-nomadic clans had congregated, colonizing Igneous and the caverns around it. Each clan had its own name still, traced back to the ship or section of the ship they'd worked on. My clan was the Motorskaps—from the old words for *engine crew*.

Together, we called ourselves Defiants. A name taken from our original flagship.

Of course, in gathering together, we had drawn the attention of the Krell. The aliens were still determined to destroy humankind, so the war continued, and we needed a constant stream of starfighters and pilots to protect our burgeoning nation.

Towering over the buildings of Igneous was the apparatus: ancient forges, refineries, and manufactories that pumped molten rock from below, then created the parts to build starfighters. The apparatus was both amazing and unique; though machinery in other caverns provided heat, electricity, or filtered water, only the apparatus of Igneous was capable of complex manufacturing.

Heat poured through the crack, making my forehead bead with sweat. Igneous was a sweltering place, with all those refineries, factories, and algae vats. And though it was well lit, it somehow always felt gloomy inside, with that red-orange light from the refineries shining on everything.

I left the crack and walked to an old maintenance locker I'd discovered in the wall here. Its hatch looked—at first glance—like any other section of the stone tunnel, and so was relatively secure. I popped it open, revealing my few secret possessions. Some parts for my speargun, my spare canteen, and my father's old pilot's pin. I rubbed that for good luck, then placed my light-line, map book, and speargun in the locker.

I retrieved a crude stone-tipped spear, clicked the hatch closed, then slung my sack over my shoulder. Eight rats could be surprisingly awkward to

carry, particularly when—even at seventeen—you had a body that refused to grow beyond a hundred and fifty-one centimeters.

I hiked down to the normal entrance into the cavern. Two soldiers from the ground troops—which barely ever did any real fighting—guarded the way in. Though I knew them both by their first names, they still made me stand to the side as they pretended to call for authorization for me to enter. Really, they just liked making me wait.

Every day. Every scudding day.

Eventually, Aluko stepped over and began looking through my sack with a suspicious eye.

“What kind of contraband do you expect I’m bringing into the city?” I asked him. “Pebbles? Moss? Maybe some rocks that insulted your mother?”

He eyed my spear as if wondering how I’d managed to catch eight rats with such a simple weapon. Well, let him wonder. Finally, he tossed the sack back to me. “On your way, coward.”

*Strength.* I lifted my chin. “Someday,” I said, “you will hear my name, and tears of gratitude will spring to your eyes as you think of how *lucky* you are to have once assisted the daughter of Chaser.”

“I’d rather forget I ever knew you. *On your way.*”

I held my head high and walked into Igneous, then made my way toward the Glorious Rises of Industry, the name of my neighborhood. I’d arrived at shift change, and passed workers in jumpsuits of a variety of colors, each marking their place in the great machine that kept the Defiant League—and the war against the Krell—functioning. Sanitation workers, maintenance techs, algae vat specialists.

No pilots, of course. Off-duty pilots stayed in the deep caverns on reserve, while the on-duty ones lived in Alta, the very base my father had died protecting. It was no longer secret, but had grown into a large installation on the surface, housing dozens of ships along with the pilot command structure and training facilities. That was where I would live starting tomorrow, once I passed the test and became a cadet.

I walked under a large metal statue of the First Citizens: a group of people holding symbolic weapons and reaching toward the sky in defiant poses, ships rising behind them trailing streaks of metal. Though it depicted those who had fought at the Battle of Alta, my father wasn’t among them.

The next turn took me to our apartment, one of many metal cubes sprouting from a larger central one. Ours was small, but big enough for

three people, particularly since I spent days at a time out in the caverns, hunting and exploring.

My mother wasn't home, but I found Gran-Gran on the roof, rolling algae wraps to sell at our cart. An official job was forbidden to my mother because of what my father had supposedly done, so we had to get by doing something unconventional.

Gran-Gran looked up, hearing me. Her name was Becca Nightshade—I shared her last name—but even those who barely knew her called her Gran-Gran. She had lost nearly all her sight a few years ago, her eyes having gone a milky white. She was hunched over and worked with sticklike arms. But she was still the strongest person I knew.

"Oooh," she said. "That sounds like Spensa! How many did you get today?"

"Eight!" I dumped my spoils before her. "And several are particularly juicy."

"Sit, sit," Gran-Gran said, pushing aside the mat filled with wraps. "Let's get these cleaned and cooking! If we hurry, we can have them ready for your mother to sell today, and I can get to tanning the skins."

I probably *should* have gone off to class—Gran-Gran had forgotten again—but really, what was the point? These days, we were just getting lectures on the various jobs one could do in the cavern. I had already chosen what I'd be. Though the test to become a pilot was supposed to be hard, Rodge and I had been studying for ten years. We'd pass for sure. So why did I need to hear about how great it was to be an algae vat worker or whatever?

Besides, since I needed to spend time hunting, I missed a lot of classes, so I wasn't suited to any other jobs. I made sure to attend the classes that had to do with flying—ship layouts and repair, mathematics, war history. Any other class I managed to make was a bonus.

I settled down and helped Gran-Gran skin and gut the rats. She was clean and efficient as she worked by touch.

"Who," she asked, head bowed, eyes mostly closed, "do you want to hear about today?"

"Beowulf!"

"Ah, the King of the Geats, is it? Not Leif Eriksson? He was your father's favorite."

"Did he kill a dragon?"

"He discovered a new world."

“With dragons?”

Gran-Gran chuckled. “A feathered serpent, by some legends, but I have no story of them fighting. Now, Beowulf, he *was* a mighty man. He was your ancestor, you know. It wasn’t until he was old that he slew the dragon; first he made his name fighting monsters.”

I worked quietly with my knife, skinning and gutting the rats, then slicing the meat and tossing it into a pot to be stewed. Most people in the city lived on algae paste. Real meat—from cattle or pigs raised in caverns with special lighting and environmental equipment—was far too rare for everyday eating. So they’d trade for rats.

I loved the way Gran-Gran told stories. Her voice grew soft when the monsters hissed, and bold when the heroes boasted. She worked with nimble fingers as she spun the tale of the ancient Viking hero who came to aid the Danes in their time of need. A warrior everybody loved; one who fought bravely, even against a larger and mightier foe.

“And when the monster had slunk away to die,” Gran-Gran said, “the hero, he held aloft Grendel’s entire arm and shoulder as a grisly trophy. He’d avenged the blood of the fallen, proving himself with strength and valor.”

Clinking sounded from below in our apartment. My mother was back. I ignored that for now. “He ripped the arm free,” I said, “with his *hands*?”

“He was strong,” Gran-Gran said, “and a warrior true. But he was of the oldenfolk, who fought with hands and sword.” She leaned forward. “You will fight with nimbleness of both hand and wit. With a starship to pilot, you won’t need to rip any arms off. Now, have you been doing your exercises?”

I rolled my eyes.

“I saw that,” Gran-Gran said.

“No you didn’t.”

“Close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back, face toward the ceiling of the cavern, far above.

“Listen to the stars,” Gran-Gran said.

“I only hear—”

“Listen to the stars. Imagine yourself flying.”

I sighed. I loved Gran-Gran and her stories, but this part always bored me. Still, I tried doing as she had taught me—sitting there with my head

tipped back, I tried to imagine that I was soaring upward. I tried to let everything else fade around me, and to picture stars shining brightly above.

"I used to do this exercise," Gran-Gran said softly, "with my mother, on the *Defiant* in the engine rooms. We worked the flagship itself, a battle cruiser larger than this entire cavern. I'd sit and listen to the hum of the engines, and to something beyond that. The stars."

I tried to imagine her as a little girl, and somehow that helped. With my eyes closed, I felt as if I were almost floating. Reaching upward . . .

"We of the engine crew," Gran-Gran said, "were odd, among the other ship crews. They thought we were strange, but we kept the ship moving. We made it travel the stars. Mother said it was because we could hear them."

I thought . . . just for a moment . . . that I heard something out there. My imagination perhaps? A distant, pure sound . . .

"Even after we crashed here, we people of the engines stayed together," Gran-Gran said. "Clan Motorskaps. If others say you're strange, it's because they remember this, and maybe fear us. This is your heritage. The heritage of warriors who traveled the sky, and will *return* to the sky. Listen."

I let out a long, calming sigh as it—whatever I thought I'd heard—faded. I opened my eyes and was shocked, for a second, to find I was back on that rooftop, surrounded by the ruddy light of Igneous.

"We maintained the engines," I said, "and moved the ship? What does that have to do with being warriors? Wouldn't it have been better to fire the weapons?"

"Only a fool thinks that weapons are more important than strategy and motion!" Gran-Gran said. "Tomorrow let me tell you again of Sun Tzu, the greatest general of all time. He taught that position and preparation won wars—not swords or spears. A great man, Sun Tzu. He was your ancestor, you know."

"I prefer Genghis Khan," I said.

"A tyrant and a monster," Gran-Gran said, "though yes, there is much to learn from the Great Khan's life. But have I ever told you of Queen Boudicca, defiant rebel against the Romans? She was your—"

"Ancestor?" Mother said, climbing the ladder outside the building. "She was a British Celt. Beowulf was Swedish, Genghis Khan Mongolian, and Sun Tzu Chinese. And they're *all* supposedly my daughter's ancestors?"

“All of Old Earth is our heritage!” Gran-Gran said. “You, Spensa, are one in a line of warriors stretching back millennia, a true line to Old Earth and its finest blood.”

Mother rolled her eyes. She was everything I wasn’t—tall, beautiful, calm. She noted the rats, but then looked at me with arms folded. “She might have the blood of warriors, but today she’s late for class.”

“She’s *in* class,” Gran-Gran said. “The important one.”

I stood up, wiping my hands on a rag. I knew how Beowulf would face monsters and dragons . . . but how would he face his mother on a day when he was supposed to be in school? I settled on a noncommittal shrug.

Mother eyed me. “He died, you know,” she said. “Beowulf died fighting that dragon.”

“He fought to his last ounce of strength!” Gran-Gran said. “He defeated the beast, though it cost him his life. And he brought untold peace and prosperity to his people! All the greatest warriors fight for peace, Spensa. Remember that.”

“At the very least,” Mother said, “they fight for irony.” She glanced again at the rats. “Thanks. But get going. Don’t you have the pilot test tomorrow?”

“I’m ready for the test,” I said. “Today is just learning things I don’t need to know.”

Mother gave me an unyielding stare. Every great warrior knew when they were bested, so I gave Gran-Gran a hug and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Soul of a warrior,” Gran-Gran whispered back. “Remember your exercises. Listen to the stars.”

I smiled, then went and quickly washed up before heading off to what would, I hoped, be my last day of class.

## 2

“Why don’t you tell us what you do each day in the Sanitation Corps, Citizen Alfir?” Mrs. Vmeer, our Work Studies instructor, nodded encouragingly at the man who stood at the front of the classroom.

This Citizen Alfir wasn’t what I’d imagined a sanitation worker to be. Though he wore a sanitation jumpsuit and carried a pair of rubber gloves, he was actually handsome: square jaw, burly arms, chest hair peeking out from above his tight jumpsuit collar.

I could almost imagine him as Beowulf. Until he spoke.

“Well, we mostly fix clogs in the system,” he said. “Clearing what we call black water—that’s mostly human waste—so it can flow back to processing, where the apparatus reclaims it and harvests both water and useful minerals.”

“Sounds perfect for you,” Dia whispered, leaning toward me. “Cleaning waste? A step up from coward’s daughter.”

I couldn’t punch her, unfortunately. Not only was she Mrs. Vmeer’s daughter, I was already on notice for fighting. Another write-up would keep me from taking the test, which was stupid. Didn’t they want their pilots to be great fighters?

We sat on the floor in a small room. No desks for us today; those had been requisitioned by another instructor. I felt like a four-year-old being read a story.

“It might not sound glorious,” Alfir said. “But without the Sanitation Corps, none of us would have water. Pilots can’t fly if they don’t have anything to drink. In some ways, we’ve got the most important job in the caverns.”



Though I'd missed some of these lectures, I'd heard enough of them. The Ventilation Corps workers earlier in the week had said their job was the most important. As had the construction workers from the day before. As had the forge workers, the cleaning staff, and the cooks.

They all had practically the same speech. Something about how we were all important pieces of the machine that fought the Krell.

"Every job in the cavern is a vital part of the machine that keeps us alive," Alfir said, mirroring my thoughts. "We can't all be pilots, but no job is more important than another."

Next, he'd say something about learning your place and following commands.

"To join us, you have to be able to follow instructions," the man said. "You have to be willing to do your part, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Remember, obedience *is* defiance."

I got it, and to an extent agreed with him. Pilots wouldn't get far in the war without water, or food, or sanitation.

Taking jobs like these still felt like settling. Where was the spark, the energy? We were supposed to be *Defiant*. We were *warriors*.

The class clapped politely when Citizen Alfir finished. Outside the window, more workers walked in lines beneath statues with straight, geometric shapes. Sometimes we seemed far less a machine of war than a clock for timing how long shifts lasted.

The students stood up for a break, and I strode away before Dia could make another wisecrack. The girl had been trying to goad me into trouble all week.

Instead, I approached a student at the back of the room—a lanky boy with red hair. He'd immediately opened a book to read once the lecture was done.

"Rodge," I said. "Rigmarole!"

His nickname—the callsign we'd chosen for him to take once he became a pilot—made him look up. "Spensa! When did you get here?"

"Middle of the lecture. You didn't see me come in?"

"I was going through flight schematics lists in my head. *Scud*. Only one day left. Aren't you nervous?"

"Of course I'm not nervous. Why would I be nervous? I've got this *down*."

"Not sure I do." Rodge glanced back at his textbook.

“Are you kidding? You know basically *everything*. Rig.”

“You should probably call me Rodge. I mean, we haven’t earned callsigns yet. Not unless we pass the test.”

“Which we will *totally* do.”

“But what if I haven’t studied the right material?”

“Five basic turn maneuvers?”

“The reverse switchback,” he said immediately, “Ahlstrom loop, the twin shuffle, overwing twist, and the Imban turn.”

“DDF g-force warning thresholds for various maneuvers?”

“Ten Gs in a climb or bank, fifteen Gs forward, four Gs in a dive.”

“Booster type on a Poco interceptor?”

“Which design?”

“Current.”

“A-19. Yes, I know that, Spensa—but what if *those* questions aren’t on the test? What if it’s something we *didn’t* study?”

At his words, I felt the faintest seed of doubt. While we’d done practice tests, the actual contents of the pilot’s test changed every year. There were always questions about boosters, fighter components, and maneuvers—but technically, any part of our schooling could be included.

I’d missed a lot of classes, but I knew I shouldn’t worry. *Beowulf* wouldn’t worry. Confidence was the soul of heroism.

“I’m going to ace that test, Rig,” I said. “You and I, we’re going to be the best pilots in the Defiant Defense Force. We’ll fight so well, the Krell will raise lamentations to the sky like smoke above a pyre, crying in desperation at our advent!”

Rig cocked his head.

“A bit much?” I asked.

“Where do you come up with these things?”

“Sounds like something Beowulf might say.”

Rodge settled back down to study, and I probably should have joined him. Yet a part of me was fed up with studying, with trying to cram things into my brain. I wanted the challenge to just *arrive*.

We had one more lecture today, unfortunately. I listened to the other dozen or so students chatter together, but I wasn’t in a mood to put up with their stupidity. Instead I found myself pacing like a caged animal, until I noticed Mrs. Vmeer walking toward me with Alfir, the sanitation guy.

She wore a bright green skirt, but the silvery cadet's pin on her blouse was the real mark of her achievement. It meant she'd passed the pilot's test. She must have washed out in flight school—otherwise she'd have a golden pin—but washing out wasn't uncommon. And down here in Igneous, even a cadet's pin was a mark of great accomplishment. Mrs. Vmeer had special clothing and food requisition privileges.

She wasn't a bad teacher—she didn't treat me much differently from the other students, and she hardly ever scowled at me. I kind of liked her, even if her daughter was a creature of distilled darkness, worthy only of being slain so her corpse could be used to make potions.

"Spensa," Mrs. Vmeer said. "Citizen Alfir wanted to speak with you."

I braced myself for questions about my father. Everyone always wanted to ask about him. What was it like to live as the daughter of a coward? Did I wish I could hide from it? Did I ever consider changing my surname? People who thought they were being empathetic always asked questions like those.

"I hear," Alfir said, "that you're quite the explorer."

I opened my mouth to spit back a retort, then bit it off. *What?*

"You go out in the caves," he continued, "hunting?"

"Um, yes," I said. "Rats."

"We have need of people like you," Alfir said.

"In *sanitation*?"

"A lot of the machinery we service runs through far-off caverns. We make expeditions to them, and need rugged types for those trips. If you want a job, I'm offering one."

A job. In *sanitation*?

"I'm going to be a pilot," I blurted out.

"The pilot's test is hard," Alfir said, glancing at our teacher. "Not many pass it. I'm offering you a guaranteed place with us. You sure you don't want to consider it?"

"No, thank you."

Alfir shrugged and walked off. Mrs. Vmeer studied me for a moment, then shook her head and went to welcome the next lecturer.

I backed up against the wall, folding my arms. Mrs. Vmeer knew I was going to be a pilot. Why would she think I'd accept such an offer? Alfir couldn't have known about me without her saying something to him, so what was up?

“They’re not going to let you be a pilot,” a voice said beside me.

I glanced and saw—belatedly—that I’d happened to walk over by Dia. The dark-haired girl sat on the floor, leaning on the wall. Why wasn’t she chatting with the others?

“They don’t have a choice,” I said to her. “Anyone can take the pilot’s test.”

“Anyone can take it,” Dia said. “But they decide who passes, and it’s not always fair. The children of First Citizens get in automatically.”

I glanced at the painting of the First Citizens on the wall. We had them in all the classrooms. And yes, I knew their children got automatic entry into flight school. They deserved it, as their parents had fought at the Battle of Alta.

Technically, so had my father—but I wasn’t counting on that to help me. Still, I’d always been told that a good showing on the test would get anyone, regardless of status, into flight school. The Defiant Defense Force—the DDF—didn’t care who you were, so long as you could fly.

“I know they won’t count me as a daughter of a First,” I said. “But if I pass, I get in. Just like anyone else.”

“That’s the thing, spaz. You won’t pass, no matter what. I heard my parents talking about it last night. Admiral Ironsides gave orders to deny you. You don’t *really* think they’d let the daughter of Chaser fly for the DDF, do you?”

“Liar.” I felt my face grow cold with anger. She was trying to taunt me again, to get me to throw a fit.

Dia shrugged. “You’ll see. It doesn’t matter to me—my father already got me a job in the Administration Corps.”

I hesitated. This wasn’t like her usual insults. It didn’t have the same vicious bite, the same sense of amused taunting. She . . . she really seemed not to care whether I believed her.

I stalked across the room to where Mrs. Vmeer was speaking with the new lecturer, a woman from the Algae Vat Corps.

“We need to talk,” I told her.

“Just a moment, Spensa.”

I stood there, intruding on their conversation, arms folded, until finally Mrs. Vmeer sighed, then pulled me to the side. “What is it, child?” she asked. “Have you reconsidered Citizen Alfir’s kind offer?”

“Did the admiral herself order that I’m not to pass the pilot’s test?”

Mrs. Vmeer narrowed her eyes, then turned and glanced toward her daughter.

“Is it true?” I asked.

“Spensa,” Mrs. Vmeer said, looking back at me. “You have to understand, this is a very delicate issue. Your father’s reputation is—”

“*Is it true?*”

Mrs. Vmeer drew her lips to a line and didn’t answer.

“Is it all lies, then?” I asked. “The talk of equality and of only skill mattering? Of finding your right place and serving there?”

“It’s complicated,” Mrs. Vmeer said. She lowered her voice. “Look, why don’t you skip the test tomorrow to save everyone the embarrassment? Come to me, and we’ll talk about what might work for you. If not sanitation, perhaps ground troops?”

“So I can stand all day on guard duty?” I said, my voice growing louder. “I need to fly. I need to *prove myself*!”

Mrs. Vmeer sighed, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, Spensa. But this was never going to be. I wish one of your teachers had been brave enough to disabuse you of the notion when you were younger.”

In that moment, everything came crashing down around me. A daydreamed future. A carefully imagined escape from my life of ridicule.

Lies. Lies that a part of me had suspected. Of *course* they weren’t going to let me pass the test. Of *course* I was too much of an embarrassment to let fly.

I wanted to rage. I wanted to hit someone, break something, scream until my lungs bled.

Instead I strode from the room, away from the laughing eyes of the other students.

### 3

I sought refuge in the silent caverns. I didn't dare go back to my mother and grandmother. My mother would undoubtedly be happy—she'd lost a husband to the Krell, and dreaded seeing me suffer the same fate. Gran-Gran . . . she would tell me to fight.

But fight what? The military itself didn't want me.

I felt like a fool. All this time, telling myself I'd become a pilot, and in truth I'd never had a chance. My teachers must have spent these years *laughing* at me behind their hands.

I walked through an unfamiliar cavern on the outer edge of what I'd explored, hours from Igneous. And still the feelings of embarrassment and anger shadowed me.

What an *idiot* I had been.

I reached the edge of a subterranean cliff and knelt, activating my father's light-line by tapping two fingers against my palm—an action the bracelet could sense. It glowed more brightly. Gran-Gran said we'd brought these with us to Detritus, that they were pieces of equipment used by the explorers and warriors of the old human space fleet. I wasn't supposed to have one, but everyone thought it had been destroyed when my father crashed.

I placed my wrist against the stone of the cliff, and tapped my fingers on my palm once more. This command made an energy line stick to the rock, connecting my bracelet to the stone.

A three-finger tap let out more slack. Using that, I could climb over the ledge—rope in hand—and lower myself to the bottom. After I landed, a two-finger tap made the rope let go of the rock above, then snap back into the bracelet housing. I didn't know how it worked, only that I needed to

recharge it every month or two, something I did in secret by plugging it into power lines in the caverns.

I crept into a cavern filled with kurdi mushrooms. They tasted foul, but were edible—and rats loved them. This would be prime hunting ground. So I turned off my light and settled down to wait, listening intently.

I had never feared the darkness. It reminded me of the exercise Gran-Gran taught, where I floated up toward the singing stars. You couldn't fear the dark if you were a fighter. And I was a fighter.

I was . . . I was going to . . . going to be a pilot . . .

I looked upward, trying to push away those feelings of loss. Instead, I was soaring. Toward the stars. And I again thought that I could hear something calling to me—a sound like a distant flute.

A nearby scraping pulled me back. Rat nails on stone. I raised my speargun, familiar motions guiding me, and engaged a smidgen of light from my light-line.

The rat turned in a panic toward me. My finger trembled on the trigger, but I didn't fire as it scrambled away. What did it matter? Was I really going to go on with my life like nothing had happened?

Usually, exploring kept my mind off my problems. Today they kept intruding, like a rock in my shoe. *Remember? Remember that your dreams have just been stolen?*

I felt like I had in those first days following my father's death. When every moment, every object, every word reminded me of him, and of the sudden hole inside me.

I sighed, then attached one end of my light-line to my spear and commanded it to stick to the next thing it touched. I took aim at the top of another cliff and fired, sticking the weightless glowing rope in place. I climbed up, my speargun rattling in its straps on my back.

As a child, I'd imagined that my father had survived his crash. That he was being held captive in these endless, uncharted tunnels. I imagined saving him, like a figure from Gran-Gran's stories. Gilgamesh, or Joan of Arc, or Tarzan of Greystoke. A hero.

The cavern trembled softly, as if in outrage, and dust fell from the ceiling. An impact up on the surface.

*That was close.* I thought. Had I climbed so far? I took out my book of hand-drawn maps. I'd been out here for quite a while by now. Hours at least. I'd taken a nap a few caverns back . . .

I checked the clock on my light-line. Night had come and gone, and it was already approaching noon on the day of the test—which would happen in the evening. I probably should have headed back. Mom and Gran-Gran would worry if I didn't show up for the test.

*To hell with the test.* I thought, imagining the indignation I'd feel at being turned away at the door. Instead, I climbed up through a tight squeeze into another tunnel. Out here my size was—for once—an advantage.

Another impact rocked the caverns. With this much debris falling, climbing to the surface was definitely stupid. I didn't care. I was in a reckless mood. I felt, almost heard, something driving me forward. I kept climbing until I finally reached a crack in the ceiling. Light shone through it, but it was an even, sterile white, not orange enough. Cool dry air blew in also, which was a good sign. I pushed my pack ahead of me, then squirmed through the crack and out into the light.

The surface. I looked up and saw the sky again. It never failed to take my breath away.

A distant skylight shone down on a section of the land, but I was mostly in shadow. Overhead, the sky sparkled with a shower of falling debris. Radiant lines like slashes. A formation of three scout-class starfighters flew through it, watching. Falling debris was often broken pieces of ships or other space junk, and the salvage from it could be valuable. It played havoc with our radar though, and could mask a Krell incursion.

I stood in the blue-grey dust and let the awe of the sky wash over me, feeling the peculiar sensation of wind against my cheeks. I'd come up close to Alta Base, which I could see in the distance, maybe only a thirty-minute walk or so away. Now that the Krell knew where we were, there was no reason to hide the base, so it had been expanded from a hidden bunker to several large buildings with a walled perimeter, antiaircraft guns, and an invisible shield to protect it from debris.

Outside that wall, groups of people worked a small strip of something I always found strange: *trees* and *fields*. What were they even doing over there? Trying to grow food in this dusty ground?

I didn't dare get close. The guards would take me for a scavenger from a distant cavern. Still, there was something dramatic about the stark green of those fields and the stubborn walls of the base. Alta was a monument to our determination. For three generations, humankind had lived like rats and nomads on this planet, but we would hide no longer.



The flight of starships streaked toward Alta, and I took a step after them. *Set your sights on something higher.* my father had said. *Something more grand . . .*

And where had that gotten me?

I shouldered my pack and my speargun, then hiked in the other direction. I had been to a nearby passage before, and I figured that with more exploring, I could connect some of my maps. Unfortunately, when I arrived, I found the passage's mouth completely collapsed.

Some space debris hit the surface in the near distance, tossing up a spray of dust. I looked up and saw a few smaller chunks streaking down overhead, fiery chunks of metal . . .

Heading straight toward me.

*Scud!*

I dashed back the way I had come.

*No. Nonononono!* The air rumbled, and I could feel the heat of the approaching debris.

*There!* I spotted a small cavern opening in the surface—part crack, part cave mouth. I threw myself toward it, skidding and sliding inside.

An enormous *CRASH* sounded behind me, and it seemed to shake the entire planet. Frantic, I engaged my light-line and slapped my hand against stone as I fell in the churning chaos. I jerked up short, connected by the light-line to the wall, as rock chips and pebbles flew across me. The cavern trembled.

Then, all grew still. I blinked dust from my eyes and found myself dangling by my light-line in the center of a small cavern, maybe ten or fifteen meters high. I'd lost my pack somewhere, and I'd scraped my arm up pretty good.

*Great. Just great, Spensa. This is what throwing a tantrum gets you.* I groaned, my head throbbing, then tapped my fingers against my palm to let the light-line out, lowering myself to the floor.

I flopped down, catching my breath. Other impacts sounded in the distance, but they dwindled.

Finally, I wobbled to my feet and dusted myself off. I managed to locate the strap of my bag sticking out from some rubble nearby. I yanked it out, then checked the canteen and maps inside. They seemed okay.

My speargun was another matter. I found the handle, but there was no sign of the rest. It was probably buried in the mound of rubble.

I slumped down against a stone. I *knew* I shouldn't go up to the surface during debris falls. I had practically *begged* for this.

A scrabbling sound came from nearby. A rat? I raised the handle of my gun immediately, then felt doubly stupid. Still, I forced myself to my feet, slung the pack over my shoulder, and increased the light of my bracelet. A shadow ducked away, and I followed, limping only a little. Maybe I could find another way out of here.

I raised my bracelet in the air, illuminating the cavern. My light reflected off something ahead of me. Metal? Maybe one of the water pipes?

I walked toward it, and it took my brain a moment to realize what I was seeing. There, nestled into the corner of the cavern—surrounded by rubble—was a *ship*.

## 4

It was a starfighter.

An old one, of a design completely unfamiliar to me. It had a wider wingspan than DDF ships, and was shaped like a wicked W. Straight, razorlike wings at the sides framed an old dust-covered cockpit in the center. The acclivity ring—the thing that gave starfighters their lift—was buried in the rubble underneath the ship, but from what I could see it looked whole.

For a moment, I forgot about the test. *A ship.*

How long had it been here to collect that much rubble around it, and that much dust? One wing had been bent almost to the ground, probably by a cave-in, and the rear boosters were a huge mess.

*I didn't know the model.* That was *incredible*. I knew every DDF design, every Krell ship, and the roving tradeship designs used by nomadic human clans. I had even studied old ships we'd flown during the first decades after crashing on Detritus.

I could rattle off each of these practically in my sleep, draw their silhouettes from memory. But I'd never seen this design. I dropped my pack and climbed—gingerly—up the wing that had been bent down. My bracelet provided light as my boots scraped off caked-on dust, revealing a scratched metallic surface. The right side of the ship was particularly banged up.

*It crash-landed here.* I thought. *Long ago.*

I climbed up near the circular cockpit, which had a glass—well, probably fusion-plastic—canopy that was remarkably intact. The ship was generations past having enough power to open its own cockpit, but I found the manual release panel right where I expected it. I brushed the dust off, and found letters—in English. They said EMERGENCY CANOPY RELEASE.

So the ship *was* human. It must be old, then. Likely as ancient as the apparatus and the rubble belt.

I yanked on the release lever to no avail. The thing was stuck. I put my hands on my hips and considered breaking in—but that seemed like a shame. This was an antique, the sort of thing that belonged on a pedestal in the Igneous ship museum, where we celebrated warriors of the past. There was no skeleton in the cockpit though, so either the pilot had escaped, or it had been here so long that even the bones had turned to dust.

*All right, let's be delicate about this.* I could be delicate. I was *incredibly* delicate. Like, all the time.

I attached one end of my light-line to the release lever, then walked across the top of the ship to the rubble at the rear, where I attached the other end of the light-line to a boulder. That separated the energy rope entirely from the bracelet, which stopped glowing. The rope could function for an hour or two once separated from its power source, but would remain stuck at the length it was when released.

I got down on my back, braced myself against the wall, and shoved the boulder with my feet. It started rolling down the rubble, and as soon as I heard a *click* from the cockpit, I disengaged the light-line with a tap. The glowing rope released its holds on either end, and was sucked back into the bracelet.

That done, I scrambled over to find the lever pulled and the ancient cockpit popped ajar. Reverent, I lifted the canopy all the way, sending dust cascading to either side. The interior looked extremely well preserved. Indeed, as I slid down into the cockpit, I found that the seat was stiff, but the leather wasn't cracked or decomposing.

*Similar controls.* I thought, resting my left hand on the throttle, my right hand on the control sphere, fingers resting in the grooves. I'd sat in mock cockpits before at the museum, but never in a *real ship*.

I reached into my pocket, feeling my father's pin, which I'd recovered from its hiding place before setting out into the tunnels. I held it up, letting it sparkle in the glow of my bracelet. Was this what my father had felt, this snug sense of *rightness* when sitting in a cockpit? What would he think if he knew his daughter spent her time hunting rats? That she was here in a dusty cavern, instead of sitting and taking the pilot test?

That she'd folded instead of fighting?

"I didn't fold!" I said. "I didn't run!"

Or . . . well, I had. But what else could I have done? I couldn't fight the entire system. If Admiral Ironsides herself—head of the DDF—didn't want me in, there was nothing I could do.

Anger flooded me. Frustration, *hatred*. Hatred at the DDF for how they'd treated my father, anger at my mother and teachers—every adult who had let me keep dreaming when surely they'd all known the truth.

I closed my eyes, and could almost feel the force of the ship's booster behind me. Could almost sense the pull of g-forces as I took a turn. The scent of crisp, clean air pulled in from the upper atmosphere and pushed into the cockpit.

I wanted to feel it more than anything. But when I opened my eyes, I was back in a dusty old broken-down antique. I would never fly. They'd sent me away.

A voice whispered from the back of my mind.

*What if that is the test?*

What if . . . what if they wanted to see what I'd do? Scud, what if Mrs. Vmeer had been lying? What if I'd run away for nothing—or worse, what if I'd just proven that *I* was a coward, like everyone claimed my father had been?

I cursed, checking the clock on my light-line bracelet. Four hours. I had *four hours* until the test. But I'd spent almost an entire day wandering. There was no way I could make it back to Igneous in time. Could I?

"Claim the stars, Spensa," I whispered.

I had to try.

## 5

I exploded into the testing room like a fighter with its booster on full overburn.

I interrupted a tall older woman in a white admiral's uniform. She had chin-length silvery hair, and she frowned at me as I pulled to a halt in the doorway. Then her eyes immediately went to the clock hanging on the wall.

The second hand ticked one last notch. Eighteen hundred hours on the dot.

*I made it.* I was a sweaty mess, my jumpsuit ripped and stained with dust from my near encounter with a piece of space debris. But I'd made it.

Nobody said a word in the room, which was located in the government buildings at the center of Igneous—near the elevators to the surface. The room was stuffed with desks; there had to be a hundred kids here. I hadn't realized there were so many seventeen-year-olds in the Defiant caverns, and these were only the ones who wanted to test for pilot.

At that moment, every single one of them was staring at me.

I kept my chin high and tried to pretend that nothing was out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, the sole open desk I spotted was the one *directly in front* of the woman with the silver hair.

Did I recognize her? That face . . .

Scud.

That wasn't just some junior admiral, it was Judy Ivans, "Ironsides" herself. She was a First Citizen and head of the DDF, so I'd seen her face in hundreds of paintings and statues. She was basically the most important person in the world.

I limped a little as I made my way over and sat down in front of her, trying not to show my embarrassment—or my pain. Dashing all this way

had involved multiple crazy descents with my light-line through caverns and tunnels. My muscles were protesting the effort, and my right leg seized up with a cramp the moment I sat down.

Wincing, I dropped my pack to the ground by my seat. An aide snatched it and carried it to the side of the room, as you weren't allowed anything at your desk but a pencil.

I closed my eyes—but then cracked them as I heard a distinct voice whispering nearby, “Oh, thank the homeworld.” Rig? I glanced and spotted him a few rows over. He had probably arrived three hours early, then spent the entire time worrying that I would be late. For absolutely no reason. I'd arrived with *at least* half a second to spare. I winked at him, then went back to trying not to scream in pain.

“As I was saying,” the admiral continued, “we are proud of you. Your work and preparation prove you to be the best and most promising generation that the DDF has ever known. You are the generation who will inherit the surface. You will lead us in a bold new era in fighting the Krell.

“Remember that this test is not to prove worthiness. You are all worthy. To field a single flight of pilots, we need hundreds of technicians, mechanics, and other support staff. Even the humble vat worker is a participant in our great quest for survival. The fighter's booster or wing should not scorn the bolt that holds it in place.

“Not all of you will pass this test, but by simply choosing to be here, you live up to my lofty expectations of you. And to those who pass: I look forward to supervising your training. I take a personal interest in the cadets.”

I frowned. She seemed so aloof, so indifferent. Surely she didn't care about me, no matter how infamous my father was.

As aides rushed to distribute the tests, Ironsides stepped to the side of the room, near some captains in sparkling uniforms. A short man in glasses whispered to her, then pointed toward me. Ironsides turned and looked at me again, her lips turning down sharply.

*Oh no.*

I glanced toward the other wall of the room, where some teachers—including Mrs. Vmeer—watched. She saw me, then shook her head as if in disappointment. But . . . I . . . thought I'd figured it out. They were just trying to see if I was truly Defiant.

Right?

An aide deliberately took a test off the bottom of the stack and placed it on my desk. Hesitant, I searched my pockets for a pencil, but found only my father's pin. At a hiss from the side, I glanced toward Rig—who tossed me a spare pencil.

*Thank you.* I mouthed, then opened the test and turned to the first question.

1. Explain, with examples of what is made from them, the fourteen types of algae grown in the vats, and the nutritional value of each.

My stomach sank. A question about *algae*? Yes, the tests often included random questions from our schooling, but . . . algae?

I flipped to the next page.

2. Explain the exact conditions required for optimal growth of algae, not limited to—but including—temperature, water purity, and vat depth.

The next was about how sewage was treated, as was the one after that. I felt my face growing cold as I realized all fifty pages were questions about things like algae vats, sewage, or ventilation. Those were lessons I'd missed while hunting. I'd shown up in the afternoon classes for physics and history, but I simply hadn't had the time to study everything.

I looked at Mrs. Vmeer again, and she wouldn't meet my eyes, so I leaned over and stole a glance at Darla Mee-Bim's test. Hers had a completely different question at the top.

1. Name five aerial maneuvers you would perform to dodge a Krell ship that had you in close pursuit.

*A tight loop, a rolling twin-scissor, the Ahlstrom loop, a reverse backpedal, and a banking roll.* Depending on how close they were, the nature of the battlefield, and what my wingmate was doing. I leaned to the side and checked the test of another neighbor, where I spotted some



numbers with the words *booster* and *throttle*. A question about acceleration and g-forces.

An aide spoke up, loud enough for most people in the room to hear. “Be advised that no one sitting next to you will have the same test, so cheating is not only punishable by expulsion, it is useless.”

I slumped back in my seat, anger boiling inside me. This was complete and utter trash. Had they prepared a special test for me, covering topics they *knew* I’d been forced to miss?

As I stewed there, several students rose and walked to the front of the chamber. They couldn’t be done already, could they? One of them—a tall, well-built young man with brown skin, short curly black hair, and an insufferable face—handed the admiral his test. From where I was sitting I could see it was blank except for his name. He showed her a pin—a special pin, blue and gold. The pin of a pilot who had fought at the Battle of Alta.

*Children of First Citizens*. I thought. All they had to do was show up and fill in their names, and they’d be given automatic entry into flight school. There were six of them today, each one getting a free slot that could have gone to other, harder-working students.

One by one the six left, and the admiral dropped their unfinished tests on a desk by the front wall. Their scores wouldn’t matter. Just like my score didn’t matter.

Dia’s words returned to me. *You don’t really think they’d let the daughter of Chaser fly for the DDF, do you?*

I tried anyway. Furious—holding my pencil so tightly I broke the tip and had to get a replacement—I scrawled on my stupid test. Each question felt intended to break my will. Algae vats. Ventilation. Sewage. Places I supposedly belonged.

*Daughter of a coward. She’s lucky we don’t just toss her into the vats.*

I wrote for hours, emotions dogfighting within me. Anger fought naive anticipation. Frustration fought hope. Realization shot down optimism.

14. Explain the proper procedure if you think a vat of algae might have been contaminated by a coworker.

I tried not to leave any questions blank, but on well over two-thirds of them, my answer boiled down to, “I don’t know. I’d ask someone who

does.” And it *hurt* to answer them, as if by doing so I was proving that I was incompetent.

But I *would not give up*. Finally the bell chimed, marking the end of the five-hour time limit. I slumped as an aide pulled the test from my fingers. I watched her walk off.

*No.*

Admiral Ironsides had returned and was speaking—now that the test had ended—with a small group of people in suits and skirts, First Citizens or National Assembly members. Ironsides was known for being stern but fair.

I stood up and walked to her, fishing in my pocket, fist closing on my father’s pin. I waited, respectful, as the students filed out for the after-test party, where they’d be joined by those who had already settled on other careers, and who had been spending the day applying for and being assigned positions. Those who took this test and failed would be given second pickings later in the week.

Tonight though, everyone would celebrate together, future pilot and future janitor alike.

Finally, Ironsides looked at me.

I held up my father’s pin. “Sir,” I said. “As the daughter of a pilot who fought at the Battle of Alta, I would like to petition for acceptance into flight school.”

She looked me up and down, noting the ripped sleeve, the dirty face, the dried blood on my arm. She took the pin from my hand, and I held my breath.

“Do you *really* think,” she said, “that I would accept the pin of a traitor?”

My heart sank.

“You aren’t even supposed to have this, girl,” she said. “Wasn’t it destroyed when he crashed? Did you steal someone else’s pin?”

“Sir,” I said, my voice taut. “It didn’t go down in the crash with him. He gave it to me before he flew that last time.”

Admiral Ironsides turned to leave.

“Sir?” I said. “Please. *Please*. just give me a chance.”

She hesitated, and I thought she was considering, but then she leaned in to me and whispered. “Girl, do you have any *idea* the kind of public relations nightmare you could cause for us? If I let you in, and you turn out to be a coward like he was . . . Well, there is *no way on this planet* I will let you into a cockpit. Be glad we even let you into this building.”

It felt like I'd been slapped. I winced. This woman—one of my heroes—turned to leave.

I grabbed her arm, and several aides nearby gasped softly. But I held on.

"You still have my pin," I said. "Those belong to the pilots and their families. Tradition—"

"The pins of *actual* pilots belong to the families," she said. "Not cowards." She pulled herself out of my grip with a shockingly firm yank.

I could have attacked her. I almost *did*; the heat was rising inside me, and my face felt cold.

Arms grabbed me from behind before I could do it. "Spin?" Rig said. "Spensa! What are you *doing*?"

"She stole it. She took my father's . . ." I trailed off as the admiral walked out with her collected attendants. Then I sagged into Rig's grasp.

"Spensa?" Rig said. "Let's go to the party. We can talk about it there. How do you think you did? I think . . . I think did terribly. Spensa?"

I pulled away from him and trudged back to my desk, suddenly feeling too exhausted to stand.

"Spin?" he asked.

"Go to the party, Rig," I whispered.

"But—"

"Leave me alone. Please. Just . . . let me be by myself."

He never did know how to deal with me when I got like this, so he hovered about, then finally trailed off.

And I sat alone in the room.

## 6

Hours passed.

My anger before had been as hot as magma. Now I just felt cold. Numb.

Echoes of the party drifted in from another area of the building.

I felt used, stupid, and most of all . . . empty. Shouldn't I have been snapping my pencil, throwing tables about in rage? Ranting about seeking vengeance upon my foes, and their children and grandchildren? Typical Spensa behavior?

Instead I sat there and stared. Until the sounds of the party grew quieter. Eventually, an aide peeked into the room. "Um, you're supposed to leave."

I didn't move.

"Are you sure you don't want to leave?"

They'd have to *drag* me out of here. I imagined it—very heroic and Defiant—but the aide didn't seem so inclined. She switched off the lights and left me there, lit only by the red-orange glow of the emergency lights.

Finally, I stood up and walked to the desk by the wall, where Ironsides had—perhaps accidentally—left the tests the children of the First Citizens had given her. I looked through the stack; each of them had only the name filled out, the other questions blank.

I took the one off the top, the first one handed in. It held the name Jorgen Weight, followed by a question.

1. Name the four major battles that secured the United Defiant Caverns' independence as the first major state on Detritus.

That was a tricky question, as people were *probably* going to forget the Unicorn Skirmish—it didn't get talked about as much. But it was where the

fledgling DDF had first employed fighters of the second generation of designs, built in secret in Igneous. I trailed over to my desk and sat down, then answered the question.

I moved on to the next, then the next. They were good questions. More than simple lists of dates or parts. Some math questions about combat speeds. But most were questions about intent, opinion, and personal preference. I struggled on two of them, trying to decide if I should say what I thought the test *wanted*, or what I thought was actually the correct answer.

I went with the second both times. Who cared anyway, right?

By the time I was finishing up, I heard people talking outside. Janitors, from the sounds of their discussion.

Suddenly I felt silly. Would I scream and force some poor janitor to pull me out by my hair? I'd been beaten. You couldn't win every fight, and there was no shame in losing when you were outnumbered. I turned over the test and tapped my pencil against it, still sitting mostly in the dark, working by the glow of the emergency lights.

I started sketching a W-shaped ship on the back of the test as a crazy idea began to form in my head. The DDF hadn't begun as an official military; it had started out as a bunch of dreamers with their own crazy idea. Get the apparatus working, create ships from some schematics that had survived our crash on the planet.

They'd built their *own* ships.

The door opened, letting in light from the hallway. I heard a bucket get set on the ground outside, and two people complaining about spills in the party room.

"I'll be out in a minute," I said, finishing my sketch. Thinking. Wondering. *Dreaming*.

"Why are you still here, kid?" a janitor asked. "You didn't want to go to the party?"

"I didn't feel much like celebrating."

He grunted. "Didn't do well on the test?"

"Turns out it doesn't matter," I said. I glanced at him, but he was backlit, just a silhouette in the doorway. "Do you ever . . .," I said. "Do you ever feel they *forced* you to be what you are?"

"No. I might have forced myself into it though."

I sighed. Mother was probably worried sick about me. I stood up and wandered over to the wall where the aide had put my pack.

“Why do you want it so much?” the janitor asked. Was there something familiar about his voice? “It’s dangerous, being a pilot. A lot of them get killed.”

“Just under fifty percent are shot down in their first five years,” I said. “But they don’t all die. Some eject. Others get shot down, but survive the crash.”

“Yes. I know.”

I froze, then frowned and looked back at the figure. I couldn’t make out his face, but something flashed on his breast. Medals? A pilot’s pin? I squinted, and made out the shape of a DDF jacket and dress slacks.

This was no janitor. I could still hear those two out in the hallway, joking with each other.

I stood up straighter. The man walked slowly to my desk, and the emergency lights revealed he was older, maybe in his fifties, with a stark white mustache. He walked with a prominent limp.

He picked up the test I’d filled out, then flipped through it. “So why?” he finally asked. “Why care so much? They never ask the most important question on these tests. Why do you want to be a pilot?”

*To prove myself, and to redeem my father’s name.* It was my immediate response, though something else warred with it. Something my father had sometimes said, something buried inside me, often overshadowed by ideas of vengeance and redemption.

“Because you get to see the sky,” I whispered.

The man grunted. “We name ourselves Defiants,” he said. “It’s the central ideal of our people—the fact that we refuse to back down. And yet, Ironsides always acts so surprised when someone defies her.” He shook his head, then set the test down again. He put something on top of it.

He turned to limp away.

“Wait,” I said. “Who are you?”

He stopped at the doorway, and the light outside showed his face more clearly, with that mustache, and eyes that seemed . . . old. “I knew your father.”

Wait. I *did* know that voice. “Mongrel?” I said. “That *is* you. You were his wingmate!”

“In another life,” he said. “Oh-seven-hundred sharp on the day after tomorrow, building F, room C-14. Show the pin to get access.”

The pin? I walked back to the desk, and found—sitting on top of my test—a cadet's pin.

I snatched it up. “But Ironsides said she'd never let me into a cockpit.”

“I'll deal with Ironsides. It's *my* class; I get final say over my students, and even she can't overrule me. She's too important for that.”

“Too important? To give orders?”

“Military protocol. When you get important enough to order an armada into battle, you're too important to interfere with how a quartermaster runs his shop. You'll see. There's a lot you know, judging by that test—but still some things you don't. You got number seventeen wrong.”

“Seventeen . . .” I flipped through the test quickly. “The overwhelming odds question?”

“The right answer was to fall back and await reinforcement.”

“No it wasn't.”

He stiffened, and I quickly bit my tongue. Should I be arguing with the person who'd just given me a *cadet's pin*?

“I'll let you into the sky,” he said, “but they're not going to be easy on you. *I'm* not going to be easy on you. Wouldn't be fair.”

“Is *anything* fair?”

He smiled. “Death is. He treats us all the same. Oh-seven-hundred. Don't be late.”







## PART TWO

# 7

The elevator doors opened, and I looked out upon a city that should not exist.

Alta was primarily a military base, so perhaps *city* was an ambitious term. Yet the elevator structure opened a good two hundred meters outside the base proper. Lining the roadway between the two were shops and homes. A real town, populated by the stubborn farmers who worked the strips of greenery beyond.

I lingered in the large elevator as it emptied of people. This represented a threshold to a new life, a life I'd always dreamed about. I found myself strangely hesitant as I stood there, pack full of clothing over my shoulder, the phantom feeling of my mother's kiss farewell on my forehead.

"Oh, isn't it the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?" a voice said from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. The speaker was a girl about my age. She was taller than I was, with tan-brown skin and long, curly black hair. I'd seen her earlier on the elevator and noted her cadet's pin. She spoke with a faint accent I didn't recognize.

"I keep thinking it can't be real," she said. "Do you think it might be some cruel prank they're playing on us?"

"What tactical advantage would they gain by that?" I asked her.

The girl took my arm in a much too familiar way. "We can do this. Just take a deep breath. Reach up. Pluck a star. That's what the Saint says."

I had no idea what to make of this behavior. People normally treated me like a pariah; they didn't take me by the arm. I was so stunned that I didn't resist as she towed me after her out of the elevator. We entered the wide walkway leading through the town, toward the base.

I'd rather have been walking with Rodge, but they'd called him in late last night to ask him something about his test, and so far I hadn't gotten word of what that meant. Hopefully he wasn't in trouble.

The girl and I soon passed a fountain. A real fountain, like from the stories. We both stopped to gape, and I extricated my arm from the girl's grasp. Part of me wanted to be offended—but she seemed so *genuine*.

"That music the water makes," she said. "Isn't it the most wonderful sound ever?"

"The most wonderful sound ever is the lamentations of my enemies, screaming my name toward the heavens with ragged, dying voices."

The girl looked at me, cocking her head. "Well bless your stars."

"Sorry," I said. "It's a line from a story." I stuck out my hand to her. Best to be on good terms with the other cadets. "I'm callsign: Spin."

"Kimmalyn," she said, shaking my hand. "Um, we're supposed to have callsigns already?"

"I'm an overachiever. What room you reporting to?"

"Umm . . ." She fished in her pocket and pulled out a paper. "C-14? Cadet Flight B."

"Same as me."

"Callsign . . . callsign . . .," Kimmalyn murmured. "What should I pick?"

"Killer?" I suggested. "Afterburn? No, that's probably too confusing. Fleshripper?"

"Couldn't it be something a little less gruesome?"

"You're going to be a warrior. You need a warrior's name."

"Not *everything* is about war!"

"Um, it kind of is—and flight school especially is." I frowned, noting the accent in her voice. "Where are you from? Not Igneous, I guess."

"Born and raised in Bountiful Cavern!" She leaned in. "We call it that, but nothing really grows there."

"Bountiful," I said. It was a cavern somewhat close to Igneous, also part of the Defiant League. "That's where the clans from the *Antioch* crew settled, right?" The *Antioch* had been one of the gunships in the old fleet, before we'd been driven into hiding here on Detritus.

"Yup. My great-grandmother was assistant quartermaster." She eyed me. "You said your callsign was Spin? Shouldn't you be something like Lamentation or Eats Enemy Eyeballs?"

I shrugged. "Spin is what my dad used to call me."

She smiled brightly at that. Scud, they'd let *this girl* in, but had denied me? What was the DDF trying to do? Put together a knitting club?

We approached the base, a group of tall, stern buildings surrounded by a wall. Right outside it, the farms gave way to an actual orchard. I stopped on the walkway, and found myself gaping again. I'd seen these trees from a distance, but up close they seemed enormous. Almost three meters tall! Before this, the tallest plant I'd seen was a mushroom that reached up to my waist.

"They planted those just after the Battle of Alta," Kimmalyn said. "It must take brave people to volunteer for service up here so exposed to the air and to Krell attacks." She looked up at the sky in awe, and I wondered if this was the first time she was seeing it.

We stepped up to a checkpoint in the wall, and I thrust my pin toward the guard there, half expecting rough treatment—like I'd always gotten from Aluko when entering Igneous. However, the bored guard only marked our names off on a list and waved us in. Not much ceremony for my first official entrance into Alta. Well, soon I'd be so famous, the guard at the door would salute me on sight.

Inside, we counted off the buildings, joining a handful of other cadets. From what I understood, around twenty-five of us had passed the test, and had been organized into three training flights. Only the best of the best would actually pass flight school and be assigned to full-time pilot duty.

Kimmalyn and I soon arrived at a wide, single-story structure near the launchpads. Flight school. I barely held myself back from running over to the glistening starfighters lined up for duty—I'd done enough gawking for one day.

Inside the building we found wide hallways, most of which appeared to be lined with classrooms. Kimmalyn squealed, then rushed over to talk to another cadet, someone she apparently knew. So I stopped by a window on the outer wall and looked out at the sky, waiting for her.

I found myself feeling . . . anxious. Not about the training, but about this place. *It's too big, too open.* The hallways were over a meter wider than those of most buildings in Igneous, and the base's buildings sprawled outward instead of being built on top of one another. The sky was just up there, always present, looming. Even with a forcefield between me and it—of the same invisible type that starfighters employed—I felt exposed.

I was going to have to sleep up here. Live, eat, *exist*. All out in the open. While I liked the sky, that didn't mean I wanted it peeking in during every intimate moment.

*I'll simply have to deal with it.* I told myself. *The warrior cannot choose her bed; she must bless the stars if she can choose her battlefield.* A quote from Junmi's *The Conquest of Space*. I loved Gran-Gran's stories about Junmi almost as much as I did the old Viking stories, even if they didn't have quite as many decapitations.

Kimmalyn returned, and we found our classroom. I took a deep breath. Time to become a pilot. We pushed open the doors.

## 8

Ten mock cockpits dominated the center of the room, arranged in a circle facing inward. Each bulky device had a seat, a control console, and part of a fuselage built around it—though no canopy. Other than that, they looked as if they’d been ripped right out of starships.

Instead of the nose cones of ships, however, each had a large box attached to the front, maybe a meter tall and half as wide. Kimmalyn and I were apparently the first of our flight to arrive, and I checked the wall clock. It was 0615. For once in my life, I was not only early—I was *first*.

Well, technically second, as Kimmalyn jumped past me to look over the mock cockpits. “Oh! I guess we’re first. Well, the Saint always said, ‘If you can’t arrive early, at least arrive before you’re late.’ ”

I walked into the room, setting down my backpack and checking out the mockpits. I recognized the control panel layout—they were from Poco-class ships, a basic, if fast, DDF starfighter model. The door opened, and two more cadets entered. The shorter boy at the front had dark blue hair and appeared to be a Yeongian. The crew of the *Yeong-Gwang*, from the old fleet, had largely been from China or Korea on Earth.

The blue-haired boy grinned as he looked over the room, putting his pack beside mine. “Wow. Our *classroom*!”

The girl behind him sauntered in like she owned the place. She was a lean, athletic-looking girl with blonde hair in a ponytail. She wore a DDF uniform jacket over her jumpsuit—loose, like she was out on the town.

Those two were soon followed by a girl with a tattoo across her lower jaw. She’d be Vician—from Vici Cavern. I didn’t know much about them, only that they were the descendants of the marines from the old space fleet.

The Vicians had their own culture and kept to themselves—though they had reputations as great warriors.

I smiled at her, but she looked away immediately and didn't respond when Kimmalyn perkily introduced herself. *Fine then.* I thought.

Kimmalyn got names and home caverns out of the other two. The guy with the blue hair was Bim, and was indeed a Yeongian. His clan had been part of the hydroponics team on the old ship, and had settled in a nearby cavern that maintained a large set of underground farms, lit and maintained by ancient machinery. I'd never eaten any of the food from there; it was reserved for those who had many achievement merits or industry merits.

The athletic girl was Hudiya, from Igneous. I didn't know her, but the cavern was a big place, with a vast population. As the time for class drew near, a tall girl entered and introduced herself as Freyja. It was a good mythological name from Old Norse—of which I approved. She kind of had the look too. Though she was skinny, she was tall, maybe even a hundred and eighty-five centimeters, and she had blonde hair, which she wore cut very short. Her boots were brand-new, polished to a shine, and done up with gold clasps.

Well, that made six of us. We'd have a few more at least. About ten minutes before the start of class, three young men walked in together. They were obviously friends, as they were talking and joking softly. I didn't recognize two of them, but the one at the front—with brown skin and short curly hair—was distinctive in a kind of baby-faced, pretty-boy way.

*The guy from the test.* I realized. The son of a First Citizen who had gotten free admission.

Great. We were saddled with a useless aristocrat, someone who lived in the lowest—and safest—of the Defiant caverns. He'd be in flight school not because of any skill or aptitude, but because he wanted to sport a cadet's pin and feel important. Judging by the way the other two talked, I instantly pegged them as his cronies. I'd have bet anything that all of them had gotten in without taking the test, so our cadet group had *three* people who didn't deserve to be there.

The tall, baby-faced guy walked to the center of the ring of seats. How could a boy have a face that was *so* extremely punchable? He cleared his throat, then clapped his hands sharply. "Get to attention, cadets! Is this how we want to present ourselves to our instructor? Lounging about, making idle chitchat? Line up!"



Kimmalyn, bless *her* stars, jumped up and stood at a kind of sloppy attention. His two cronies stepped over and fell into step as well, doing a much better impression of real soldiers. Everyone else just kind of looked at him.

“What gives you the right to order us around?” asked Hudiya, the athletic girl from my own cavern. She stood leaning against the wall, arms folded.

“I want to make a good first impression on the instructor, cadet,” Jerkface said. “Think how inspiring it will be when he comes in to find us all waiting at attention.”

Hudiya snorted. “Inspiring? We’d look like a bunch of suck-ups.”

Jerkface ignored her, instead inspecting his line of three cadets. He shook his head at Kimmalyn, whose version of “attention” involved standing on the tips of her toes and saluting with *both* hands. It was ridiculous.

“You look ridiculous,” Jerkface said to her.

The girl’s face fell, and she slumped. I felt an immediate burst of protective anger. I mean . . . he was right, but he didn’t have to belt it out like that.

“Who taught you to stand at attention?” Jerkface asked. “You’re going to embarrass us. I can’t have that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “She’d be stealing your spot, since embarrassing us is clearly *your* job, Jerkface.”

He looked me up and down—taking obvious note of the patched state of my pilot’s jumpsuit. It had been one of my father’s, and had required serious modification to fit me.

“Do I know you, cadet?” he asked. “You look familiar.”

“I was sitting in the front row taking the test,” I said, “when you turned in your exam without a single question answered. Maybe you saw me there when you glanced at the rest of the room, to see what people look like when they actually have to *work* to get things.”

He drew his lips to a line. It seemed I’d touched a nerve. Excellent. First blood.

“I chose not to waste resources,” he said, “making someone grade my test when I had already been offered a slot.”

“One you didn’t earn.”

He glanced at the other cadets in the room, who were watching with interest, then he lowered his voice. “Look. You don’t need to make trouble. Just fall into line, and—”

“Fall into line?” I said. “You’re *still* trying to give us orders?”

“It’s obvious I’m going to be your flightleader. You might as well get used to doing what I say.”

Arrogant son of a supernova. “Just because you cheated your way into —”

“I didn’t *cheat*!”

“—just because you *bought* your way into flight school doesn’t mean you’ll be flightleader. You need to watch yourself. Don’t make an enemy out of me.”

“And if I do?”

Scud, it was annoying to have to look up at him. I leaped onto my seat to gain a height advantage for the argument—an action that seemed to surprise him.

He cocked his head. “What—”

“Always attack from a position of superior advantage!” I said. “When this is done, Jerkface, I will hold your tarnished and melted pin up as my trophy as your smoldering ship marks your pyre, and the final resting place of your crushed and broken corpse!”

The room grew quiet.

“All right . . .,” Jerkface said. “Well, that was . . . descriptive.”

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn added. Hudiya gave me a thumbs-up and a grin, though the others in the room plainly had no idea what to make of me.

And . . . maybe my reaction had been over the top. I was used to making a scene; life had taught me that aggressive threats would cause people to back off. But did I need to do that here?

I realized something odd in that moment. *None of these people seemed to know who I was.* They hadn’t grown up near my neighborhood; they hadn’t gone to class with me. They might have heard of my father, but they didn’t know me from any other cadet.

Here, I wasn’t the rat girl or the daughter of a coward.

Here I was *free*.

The door chose that moment to open, and our instructor—Mongrel—stopped in the doorway, holding a steaming mug of coffee in one hand, a clipboard in the other. In the light, I recognized him from the pictures of the First Citizens, though his hair was greyer, and that mustache made him appear much older.

We must have looked like quite the menagerie. I was still standing on the seat of my mockpit, looming over Jerkface. Several of the others had been snickering at our exchange, while Kimmalyn was again trying to execute a salute.

Mongrel glanced at the clock, which had just hit seven hundred hours. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything intimate.”

“Uh . . .,” I said. I jumped off my seat and tried a little laugh.

“That wasn’t a joke!” Mongrel barked. “I don’t joke! Line up by the far wall, all of you!”

We scrambled to obey. As we lined up, Jerkface pulled off a precise salute, and he held it, at perfect attention.

Mongrel glanced at him and said, “Don’t be a suck-up, son. This isn’t basic training, and you aren’t grunts from the ground corps.”

Jerkface’s expression fell and he lowered his arm, then snapped to attention anyway. “Um, sorry, sir!”

Mongrel rolled his eyes. “My name is Captain Cobb. My call-sign is Mongrel, but you will call me Cobb—or sir, if you must.” He trailed along the line, his limp prominent, taking a sip of his coffee. “The rules of this classroom are simple. I teach. You learn. Anything that interferes with that is likely to get one of you killed.” He paused near where I stood by Jerkface. “That includes flirting.”

I felt my face go cold. “Sir! I wasn’t—”

“It also includes talking back to me! You’re in flight school now, stars help you. Four months of training. If you make it to the end without being kicked out or shot down, then you pass. That’s it. There are no tests. There are no grades. Just you in a cockpit, convincing me you deserve to remain there. I am the only authority that matters to you now.”

He waited, watching to see how we responded. And wisely, none of us said anything.

“Most of you won’t make it,” he continued. “Four months may not seem like long, but it will feel like an eternity. Some of you will drop out under the stress, and the Krell will kill some others. Usually, a flight of ten ends up with one cadet graduating to full pilot, maybe two.” He stopped at the end of the line, where Kimmalyn stood biting her lip.

“This bunch though . . .,” Cobb added, “I’ll be surprised if any of you make it.” He limped away from us, setting his coffee on a small desk at the

front of the room, then riffling through the papers on his clipboard. “Which of you is Jorgen Weight?”

“Me, sir!” Jerkface said, standing up straighter.

“Great. You’re flightleader.”

I gasped.

Cobb eyed me, but said nothing. “Jorgen, you’ll need two assistant flightleaders. I’ll want the names by the end of the day.”

“I can give you those now, sir,” he said, pointing to his two cronies—a shorter boy and a taller one. “Arturo and Nedd.”

Cobb marked something on his clipboard. “Great. Everyone, pick a seat. We’re going to—”

“Wait,” I said. “That’s *it*? That’s how you choose our flight-leader? You’re not even going to see how we do first?”

“Pick a seat, cadets,” Cobb repeated, ignoring me.

“But—” I said.

“Except Cadet Spensa,” he said, “who will instead meet me in the hallway.”

I bit my tongue and stomped out into the hallway. I probably should have contained my frustration, but . . . *really*? He immediately picked Jerkface? Just like that?

Cobb followed me, then calmly shut the door. I prepared an outburst, but he spun on me and hissed, “Are you *trying* to ruin this, Spensa?”

I choked off my retort, shocked by his sudden anger.

“Do you know how far I had to stick my neck out to get you into this class?” he continued. “I argued that you sat in the room for hours, that you finished a damn near perfect test. It still took *every bit* of clout and reputation I’ve earned over the years to pull this off. Now, the first chance you get, you’re throwing a tantrum?”

“I . . . But you didn’t see what that guy was doing before class! He was strutting around, claiming he’d be flightleader.”

“Turns out he had good reason!”

“But—”

“But what?” Cobb demanded.

I stifled the words I was going to say, and instead remained silent.

He took a deep breath. “Good. You can control yourself at least a little.” He rubbed his brows with his thumb and forefinger. “You’re just like your father. I spent half the time wanting to strangle the man. Unfortunately,

you're not him—you have to live with what he did. You *have* to control yourself, Spensa. If it looks like I'm favoring you, someone will call improper bias, and you'll be pulled from my class faster than you can spit."

"So you can't favor me?" I asked. "But *everyone* can favor the son of an aristocrat who didn't even have to finish his test?"

Cobb sighed.

"Sorry," I said.

"No, I walked into that one," he said. "Do you know who that boy is?"

"Son of a First Citizen?"

"Son of *the* Jeshua Weight, a hero of the Battle of Alta. She flew seven years in the DDF, and has over a hundred confirmed kills. Her husband is Algernon Weight, National Assembly Leader and high foreman of our largest intercavern shipping company. They're among the most heavily merited people in the lower caverns."

"So their son and his cronies get to be our leaders, just because of what their parents did?"

"Jorgen's family owns *three* private fighters, and he has been training on them since he was fourteen. He has nearly a thousand hours in the cockpit. How many do *you* have?"

I blushed.

"His 'cronies,' " Cobb said, "are Nedd Strong—who has two brothers in the DDF right now—and Arturo Mendez, son of a cargo pilot who had sixteen years in the DDF. Arturo has been acting as copilot with his father, and is certified with two hundred hours' flight time. Again, how many hours do you have?"

"I . . ." I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for questioning you, sir. Is this the part where I do push-ups, or clean a bathroom with a toothbrush or something?"

"I already said this *isn't* infantry training. The punishment here isn't some menial stupidity." Cobb pulled open the door to the room. "Push me too far, and the punishment will be simple: you won't get to fly."

## 9

*You won't get to fly.*

Never had I heard words more soul-crushing. When the two of us reentered the training room, Cobb pointed at a seat by the wall. Not a cockpit, just an empty chair.

I slunk over and settled down, feeling thoroughly routed.

"These contraptions," Cobb said, rapping his knuckles on one of the boxes in front of the mockpits, "are holographic projectors. Old technology from the days when we were a fleet. When these machines are on, you'll think you're in a cockpit; they will let us train you to fly without risking a real fighter. The simulation isn't perfect, however. It has some haptic feedback, but it can't replicate g-forces. You'll need to train in the centrifuge to accustom yourself to that.

"DDF tradition is that you get to pick your own callsign. I suggest you start considering, as you'll carry the name for the rest of your life. It will be how the most important people—your flightmates—come to know you."

Jerkface's hand went up.

"Don't tell me *now*, cadet," Cobb said. "Anytime in the next few days is fine. Right now, I want to—"

The door to the room banged open. I leaped to my feet, but it wasn't an attack or an emergency.

It was Rig. And he was wearing a cadet's pin.

"I was wondering if you'd show up," Cobb said, picking up his stack of papers. "Rodge McCaffrey? You think it's a fine idea to show up late to your *first day* in flight school? You going to show up late when the Krell attack?"

Rig sucked in a breath and shook his head, going white, like a flag of truce. And . . . Rig was a cadet. When he'd gone in last night to talk to them about his test, I'd been worried, but it looked like he'd gotten in! I wanted to whoop for joy.

But there was *no way* Rig had been late without good reason. This was a kid who scheduled extra time in his day for sneezes when he had a cold. I opened my mouth, but held back at a glance from Cobb.

"Sir," Rig finally said, catching his breath. "Elevator. Malfunction."

Cobb walked to the side of the room and pushed an intercom button. "Jax," he said, "will you check if there was an elevator malfunction today?"

"Don't need to check, Captain," a voice replied through a speaker above the button. "Elevator 103-D was down for two hours, with people trapped inside. It's been giving us trouble for months."

Cobb released the button, then eyed Rig. "They say you got the highest score on the test this year, cadet."

"That's what they told me, sir. They called me in, and the admiral gave me an award and everything. I'm so sorry I'm late. I didn't meant to do this, particularly on my first day. I about died when—"

"Yeah, that'll do," Cobb said, waving toward one of the seats. "Don't wear out my goodwill, son."

Rig took the seat gladly, but then saw me on the side of the room and gave me a huge thumbs-up. We'd made it. Both of us somehow, with Rig at the top, which was awesome—so at least the test really *was* fair for him.

Cobb walked over to Jerkface's seat, then flipped a switch on the side of the box in the front. A veil of light surrounded the mockpit—silent, shimmering, like a glowing bubble. From inside, Jerkface breathed out a soft—but audible—prayer to the North Star. I leaned forward in my chair.

"It can be disorienting," Cobb said, walking over and turning on Arturo's machine, then Nedd's. "Though it's no match for *actually* being in the air, it's a reasonable substitute."

I waited, tense, as he went around the circle, flipping on devices one after another. Each cadet made some audible signal of appreciation—a little gasp, or a "Wow." My heart just about broke as Cobb turned away from the last empty seat and walked toward the front of the room.

Then, as if remembering something he'd left behind, he looked over his shoulder at me.

I nearly exploded with anticipation.

Finally he nodded toward the empty mockpit. I scrambled out of my seat and climbed in as he flipped the switch. Light flashed around me, and in the blink of an eye I seemed to be sitting in the cockpit of a Poco-class fighter on a launchpad outside the building. The illusion was so incredible that I gasped, then stuck my hand outside the “canopy” just to be sure. The hologram wavered and fell apart into little grains of light—like falling dust—when my hand broke through it.

I pulled my hand back in, then inspected the controls: a throttle lever, a dashboard full of buttons, and a control sphere for my right hand. The sphere was a globe I could palm, with grooves for my fingers and buttons at the tips.

Outside the holographic cockpit canopy, I could see the other “ships” in a line beside a picture-perfect reproduction of Alta Base. I could even look up and see the sky, the faint patterns of the rubble belt . . . everything.

Cobb’s mustachioed face broke through the sky—like one of the Saints themselves—as he leaned in through the hologram to speak with me. “You like the feel of this, cadet?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “More than anything.”

“Good. Don’t lose it.”

I met his eyes and nodded.

He backed away. “All right, cadets,” he said. His voice felt ghostly coming from seemingly nowhere. “I don’t waste time. Every day you’re training is a day good pilots are dying in the fight without you as backup. Put on the helmets at your feet.”

I did so, and Cobb’s voice now came through the earpiece inside my helmet. “Let’s practice takeoffs,” he said. “That should—”

“Sir!” Jerkface said. “I can show them.”

I rolled my eyes.

“All right, flightleader,” Cobb said. “I’m willing to let someone else do the hard work for me. Let’s see you get them into the sky.”

“Yes, sir!” Jerkface said. “Flight, your fighters don’t need their boosters to raise or lower your altitude. That is handled by the acclivity ring, the hooplike device underneath every starship. Its power switch is . . . um . . . top of the front console, the red button. Never turn that off when flying, or you’ll drop like a piece of debris.”

One ship down the line suddenly lit up beneath as the acclivity ring turned on.



“Use your control sphere to bank right or left,” Jerkface continued, “or to make small movements. To do a quick ascent, use the smaller lever beside the throttle and pull it upward.”

Jerkface’s starship lifted into the air in a steady ascent straight up. His ship, like the rest of ours, was a Poco-class. They looked like glorified pencils with wings, but they were still starships, and I was in a cockpit. Holographically kind of almost, but still it was *happening*.

I flicked the red switch, and my entire dashboard lit up. I grinned, holding the control sphere in my right hand and yanking on the altitude control with my left.

My ship sprang backward in a sudden jerking motion, and I managed to crash it into the building behind us.

And I wasn’t the only one. Our ships responded with far more sensitivity than we were expecting. Rig flipped his completely upside down somehow; Kimmalyn darted up into the air, then screamed at the sudden motion and brought herself back down and flattened right on the launchpad.

“Altitude control *only*,” Jerkface said. “Don’t touch the control sphere right now, cadets!”

Cobb chuckled from outside somewhere.

“Sir!” Jerkface said. “I . . . er . . . That . . .” He fell silent. “Huh.”

I was glad nobody could see how much I was blushing. I appeared to have crashed my ship into a holographic version of the flight school mess hall, judging by the tables and spilled food. I felt as if I should have whiplash, but while my chair shook a little when the ship moved, it couldn’t replicate the true motions of flight.

“Congratulations, cadets,” Cobb said. “I’m pretty sure half of you are dead now. Thoughts, flightleader?”

“I didn’t expect them to be *that* hopeless, sir.”

“We’re not hopeless,” I said. “Just . . . eager.”

“And maybe a little embarrassed,” Kimmalyn noted.

“Speak for yourself,” a girl’s voice said through my earpiece. What was her name again? Hudiya, the ponytailed girl with the loose jacket. She was laughing. “Oh, my *stomach*. I think I’m going to hurl. Can I do it again?”

“Again?” Kimmalyn asked.

“It was awesome!”

“You *just* said you thought you were going to hurl.”

“In a good way.”

“How do you hurl in a good way?”

“Attention!” Cobb snapped. My ship fuzzed around me, and suddenly all of us were back in a line, our ships whole again, the simulation apparently reset. “Like a lot of new pilots, you’re not accustomed to how responsive your ships can be. With the power of the acclivity ring and your booster, you can perform *precision* maneuvers—particularly once we get you trained with light-lances.

“That versatility comes at a cost, however. It’s *really* easy to get yourself killed in a starship. So today we’re going to practice three things. Going up. Coming down. And *not dying* while you do either. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” came our chorus.

“You’re also going to learn to control your radio. The set of blue buttons on the top left of your control panel manages that; you’ll need to accustom yourselves to opening a line to the whole flight, or to your wingmate alone. We’ll go over the other buttons later. I don’t want you distracted right now. Stars only know how you could do worse than that little performance you just gave, but I’m disinclined to give you the opportunity!”

“Yes, sir!” we belted out, somewhat sheepishly.

And so, for the next *three hours*. we took off and landed.

It was frustrating work because I felt like I should be able to do far more. I’d studied so hard and I’d practiced in my mind. I felt like I knew this.

Only I didn’t. My crash at the start proved that. And my continuing inability frustrated me.

The sole way to overcome that was to practice, so I dedicated myself to the instruction. Up and down. Up and down. Time after time. I did it with gritted teeth, determined not to crash again.

Eventually, we all managed to make five trips up and down without crashing. As Cobb sent us up again, I leveled at five hundred on the altimeter, then stopped myself there. I released a breath, leaning back as the other cadets joined me in a line.

Jerkface zoomed past and did a little flip before settling in. Show-off.

“All right, flightleader,” Cobb said. “Call your flight roll and get a verbal confirmation of readiness from each member. You’ll do this before every engagement, to verify that nobody is having mechanical or physical troubles. Flight, *if* you are experiencing troubles, *tell your flightleader*. If you fly into battle knowing something is wrong with your ship, then you are responsible for the damage you might cause.”

“Sir,” Bim asked over the line, “is it true that if we crash a real ship while in training, we can’t graduate?”

“Usually,” Cobb said, “if a cadet crashes their starfighter, it’s a sign of some kind of negligence, the type that indicates they shouldn’t be trusted with that kind of equipment.”

“And if we eject?” Bim said. “I’ve heard that cadets do training in real combat situations. If we get shot down and eject, does it mean we’re out? As a cadet, I mean?”

Cobb was silent for a moment. “There’s no hard-and-fast rule,” he said.

“But it’s tradition, right?” Bim asked. “A cadet who ejects and scuttles their ship stays grounded from then on.”

“It’s because they’re looking for cowards,” Hudiya said. “They want to kick out cadets who are too eager to eject.”

I felt a jolt of adrenaline, as I always did when someone mentioned the word *coward*. But it wasn’t in reference to me, and never would be. *I* would never eject.

“Real pilots,” said one of Jerkface’s cronies, “the best of the best? They can steer a crashing ship into a salvageable landing, even if they’ve been shot. Acclivity rings are worth so much that pilots have to protect them, because the pilot isn’t worth as much as—”

“That’s enough, Arturo,” Cobb cut in. “You’re spreading stupid rumors. Both pilots *and* ships are valuable. You cadets ignore that talk—you might hear it from other flights—about steering your ship into a controlled landing. You hear me? If you’re shot down, you *eject*. Don’t worry about the consequences, worry about your life. If you’re a good enough pilot it won’t impact your career, tradition or no tradition.”

I frowned. That wasn’t what I’d heard. Full pilots who got shot down, they were given second chances. But cadets? Why graduate someone who had been shot down when you were looking for only the very best?

“Stupid pilot pride,” Cobb grumbled. “It’s cost us more than the Krell have, I swear. Flightleader, weren’t you going to call roll?”

“Oh, right!” Jorgen said. “Cadet Flight B! Time to—”

“Cadet Flight B?” Cobb said. “You can come up with a better name than that, flightleader.”

“Er. Yes, sir. Um . . .”

“Skyward Flight,” I said.

“Skyward Flight,” Jerkface said, jumping on the name. “Roll call and confirmation of readiness, in order of dashboard ship identification!”

“Skyward Two,” said the taller of the two cronies. “Callsign: Nedder. Confirmed.”

“Skyward Three,” said Hudiya. “Callsign: Hurl. Confirmed.”

“Seriously?” Jerkface asked. “Hurl?”

“Memorable, isn’t it?” she asked.

Jerkface sighed.

“Skyward Four,” said Rig. “Um . . . Callsign: Rigmarole. Wow, it sounds good to say that. And, um, confirmed.”

“Skyward Five,” said Arturo, the shorter of the two cronies. “Callsign: Amphisbaena.”

“Amphi-what?” Hurl asked.

“It’s a two-headed dragon,” Arturo said. “It’s an *extremely* fearsome animal from mythology. Confirmed.”

“Skyward Six,” Kimmalyln said. “So . . . callsign. I need one of those, eh?”

“Saint,” I suggested.

“Oh, *stars* no,” she replied.

“You can pick one later,” Cobb said. “Just use your first name for now.”

“No, no,” she said. “Just call me Quick. No need to procrastinate my choice; the Saint always said, ‘Save time and do that job now.’”

“How,” Arturo said, “does doing something ‘now’ save you any time? Theoretically, the indicated job will take the same amount of time now as it would later.”

“Tangent, Amphi,” Jerkface said. “Skyward Seven?”

“Skyward Seven,” said an accented girl’s voice I didn’t think I’d heard before. “Callsign: Morningtide. Confirmed.”

Wait. Who was that? I wracked my brain. *The Vician girl with the tattoo on her lower jaw*. I realized. *The one who brushed me off earlier*.

“Skyward Eight,” said Bim. “Bim. That’s my name, not my call-sign. I’ll get back to you on that later. I don’t want to screw it up. Confirmed, by the way.”

“Skyward Nine,” said Freyja, the tall blonde girl. “Callsign: FM. Confirmed.” She’d launched her ship the first time without crashing, the only one who had done that except for Jerkface and his cronies. Her expensive clothing and those golden clasps on her boots made me think she

must be from the lower caverns too. Her family obviously had enough merits for fancy requisitions.

“Skyward Ten,” I said. “Callsign: Spin. Confirmed.”

“What a bland callsign,” Jerkface said. “I’ll be Jager. It means *hunter* in one of the old—”

“Can’t be Jager,” Cobb said. “We’ve already got a Jager. Nightmare Flight. Just graduated two months ago.”

“Oh,” Jerkface said. “I . . . er. I didn’t know that.”

“How about Jerkface?” I said. “It’s what I’ve been calling you in my head. We can call you that.”

“No. We. Can’t.”

I heard a number of snickers—including one I was pretty sure came from Nedd “Nedder” Strong, the taller of Jerkface’s cronies.

“All right,” Cobb said, ignoring us. “Now that you’ve done that, maybe we can talk about how to actually *move* somewhere.”

I nodded, eager, though I realized nobody could see me.

“Hold the throttle with a light touch,” Cobb directed. “Nudge it forward slowly, until the dial says point-one.”

I did so, timid—extra worried that I’d repeat my embarrassment from earlier—and I let out a breath as my ship moved forward at a modest boost.

“Good,” Cobb said. “You’re now going point-one Mag. That’s a tenth of Mag-1, which is normal combat speed. Even-numbered designations, you lower yourselves three hundred feet. You’d be more used to saying a hundred meters, but it’s tradition to use feet for altitude, for some scudding reason, and you’ll get used to it. Odd-numbered designations, you go up three hundred. That will give you some space to try very *slight* moves to the left and right as you fly.”

I did as he said, diving down, then leveling out. I tried a veer right, and a veer left. It felt . . . natural. Like I was meant to do this. Like I—

A series of loud alerts erupted. I jumped, then—panicked—I searched my dashboard, worried I’d done something wrong. Finally, my brain put together that the sound wasn’t coming from my ship, or even from our room. It was alarms outside the building.

*That’s the attack warning.* I thought, pulling off my helmet to hear better. The trumpet sounds were different up here in Alta. Faster-paced.

I pushed my head up through the canopy of my hologram, and saw several others doing the same. Cobb had stepped toward the windows of our

classroom and was looking out toward the sky. I could barely make out some distant falling debris burning in the atmosphere. Krell attack.

The speaker on the wall crackled. “Cobb,” Admiral Ironsides’s voice said. “Do you have those greenmoss cadets hovering yet?”

Cobb walked to the panel on the wall and pushed a button. “Barely. I’m still convinced one of them is going to find a way to make their ship self-destruct, even though Pocos don’t have that function.”

“Great. Get them up, spread formation, above Alta.”

Cobb glanced at us before pressing the button again. “Confirmation requested, Admiral. You want the *new cadets* in the sky during an attack?”

“Get them up there, Cobb. This is a large wave. Nightmare Flight is down in the city for R&R, and I don’t have time to call them back. Ironsides out.”

Cobb hesitated, then he barked out an order. “You heard the admiral! Skyward Flight, to the launchpad. *Go!*”

## 10

To the launchpad?

Now?

After *one day* of flight training?

Cobb slammed a button on his desk, shutting down all of our holographic emitters. I couldn't help wondering if this was some kind of test or a strange initiation—yet the pale look of Cobb's face persuaded me otherwise. He didn't like this.

What in the *stars* was the admiral thinking? Surely . . . surely she wouldn't get my *entire flight* killed just as retribution for Cobb letting me into the DDF? Right?

We left the training room in a ragged jumble. "Rig," I said, falling in beside my friend as we jogged down the hallway, alarms blaring in the distance. "Can you believe this? *Any* of this?"

"No. I still can't believe I'm here, Spin. When they called me in and told me about my score, I thought they were going to accuse me of cheating! Then the admiral gave me an award and took some photos. It's almost as incredible as the way Cobb let you in, after—"

"Never mind that," I said quickly. I didn't want anyone overhearing that my circumstances were unusual.

I glanced to the side and found Jerkface jogging a few paces away. He narrowed his eyes at me. Great.

We burst out of the training building and gathered on the steps outside right as a flight of Fresa-class starships launched into the sky. One of the on-duty flights; there were usually several of those, along with another flight or two that could be called up in an emergency.

So why did they need us? I didn't get it.

Cobb emerged from the building and gestured to a line of ten Poco-class fighters on a nearby launchpad. Ground crew were positioning ladders by them.

“On the double!” Jerkface shouted. “To your ships! Everyone remember your number?”

Kimmalyn stopped in place.

“You’re six, Quirk,” Cobb said.

“Um, it was actually Quick—”

“Get going, you fools!” Cobb yelled. “You’re on orders!” He glanced at the sky. A set of sonic booms exploded from the ships that had taken off earlier. Even though they’d moved far out, the booms still rattled the windows.

I hurried to my ship, climbed the ladder to the open cockpit, then stopped. *My ship.*

A member of the ground crew climbed up the ladder after me. “You getting in?” he asked.

I blushed, then hopped into the cockpit.

He handed me a helmet, then leaned in. “This ship is straight out of repairs. You’ll use it when you’re on orders, though it’s not a hundred percent yours. You’ll be sharing it with a cadet in another flight until enough wash out.”

I pulled on my helmet and gave him a thumbs-up. He climbed down and pulled the ladder away. My cockpit’s canopy closed, then sealed. I sat there in silence, collecting my breath, then reached forward and tapped the button that engaged the acclivity ring. The dash lit up, and a hum vibrated through the ship. *That* hadn’t been in the simulation.

I glanced to the side—toward the mess hall I’d crashed into not four hours ago.

*Don’t stress. You just did this a hundred times, Spensa.*

But I couldn’t help thinking about what we’d discussed earlier. That cadets who crashed, or ejected, weren’t—by tradition—allowed to graduate

...

I gripped the altitude control and waited for orders. Then I blushed again and pushed the blue button that turned on the radio.

“—anyone wave at her, maybe?” Arturo’s voice came through my helmet. “FM, can you see—”

“Spin checking in,” I said. “Sorry.”



“All right, flight,” Jerkface said. “Lift off, smooth and easy, like we practiced. Straight up fifteen hundred feet, then hover.”

I gripped the controls, and found my heart thundering inside my chest. First time into the sky.

*Go.* I lifted my Poco into a vertical ascent. And it was *glorious*. The sense of motion, the press of g-forces pulling me down, the view of the base shrinking beneath me . . . the open sky, welcoming me home . . .

I leveled off right when the altimeter read fifteen hundred. The others gathered in a line next to me, stark blue acclivity rings glowing underneath each ship. In the far distance, I saw flashes of light from the battle.

“Flight roll,” Jerkface said.

All nine of us confirmed back to him, then we fell silent. “Now what?” I asked.

“Trying to call in for orders,” Jerkface said. “I don’t know the band I’m supposed to—”

“I’m here,” Cobb’s voice said over the radio. “Looking good, cadets. That’s a damn near perfect line. Except for you, Quirk.”

“Quick, sir,” Kimmalyn said—indeed, her ship had gone up maybe fifty feet above the rest of us. “And . . . I’m just gonna sit tight here, snug and happy I didn’t crash into anyone. As the Saint said, ‘Ain’t nothing wrong with being a little wrong once in a while.’ ”

“Fair enough,” Cobb said. “But I have orders from Flight Command. Flightleader, lead your flight up to two thousand feet, then throttle to point-two Mag, and head—carefully—out past the city. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

“Right,” Jerkface said. “Everyone, two thousand and hover, and I want you to stop sharp this time, Quirk.”

“Sure thing, Jerkface,” she replied.

He cursed softly as we went up higher—high enough that the city below looked almost like a toy. I could still see the flashes in the distance, though the falling debris was more dynamic. Streaks of red fire, trailing smoke, falling right through the battlefield.

Per Cobb’s instructions, we inched our throttles forward and engaged the boosters. And just like that, I was flying—really flying—for the first time. It wasn’t fast, and I spent most of it sweating and overly cautious about my every movement. A part of me was still in awe.

It was *finally happening*.

We flew out toward the battlefield, but before we'd gotten very far, Cobb called again.

"Halt it here, cadets," he said, sounding more relaxed. "I've been given more information. You aren't going to fight—a problem with the elevators caught us with our pants down. One of the flights that was supposed to be on reserve got stuck below.

"They'll relieve you soon. Until then, the admiral wants to make it seem like we have more reinforcements than we actually do. She sent you and another flight of cadets to hover close outside the city. The Krell won't fly in and risk engaging what they assume are fresh ships."

I nodded slowly, remembering one of Gran-Gran's lessons. *All warfare is based on deception*. Sun Tzu had said. *When we are able to attack, we must seem unable. When we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near*. It made sense to use a few dummy flights to worry the Krell.

". . . Sir," Jorgen said, "can you tell us what is happening on the battlefield? So we can be ready, just in case?"

Cobb grunted. "You all passed the test, so I assume that you can tell me basic Krell attack strategy."

I started to answer, but Arturo beat me to it.

"When debris starts crashing down," he said, speaking quickly, "the Krell often use the fall to mask their radar signatures. They fly low, underneath our larger AA guns, and try to approach Alta. If they arrive, they can drop a lifebuster bomb."

I shivered. A lifebuster would not only vaporize everyone in Alta—shields or no shields—it would collapse the lower caverns, burying Igneous and destroying the apparatus.

"The Krell don't always use a lifebuster though," I said, jumping in. "Those take a special slow-moving bomber to carry them. They must be expensive or difficult to make or something—because the Krell often retreat the bomber if threatened. Most of the time the Krell and the DDF fight over the falling debris. It often contains salvageable acclivity stone, which we can use to make more starfighters."

"I suppose you *might* be right," Arturo said, sounding dissatisfied. "But he asked for their basic strategy. The basic strategy is to try to destroy Alta."

"Three out of four skirmishes never involve a lifebuster!" I said. "We think they're trying to wear us down, destroy as many ships as possible,

since it's harder for us to replace them than it is for the Krell."

"All right," Cobb said, cutting in. "You two can show off for each other later. You're both very smart. Now shut up."

I sat back in my cockpit, uncertain if I should feel complimented or insulted. That . . . seemed a common mix of emotions when dealing with Cobb.

"Nobody in today's battle has seen a lifebuster bomber," Cobb said. "That doesn't mean one couldn't approach, but today's debris fall does contain a lot of machinery with old acclivity rings."

*Ha!* I thought. *I was right.* I looked to see if I could spot Arturo, to gloat, but couldn't make him out in the lineup of ships.

"Sir," Jerkface said, "something has always bothered me about the way we fight. We respond to the Krell, right? When a debris fall comes, we fly out to check it. If we find Krell, we engage them."

"Generally, yes," Cobb said.

"So that means we always let them pick the battlefield," Jerk-face said. "Yet the way to win in war is to surprise the enemy. To keep them off balance. To make them think we're not going to attack when we will, and vice versa."

"Someone's been reading a little too much Sun Tzu," Cobb said. "He fought in a different era, flightleader—and with very different tactics."

"Shouldn't we at least *try* to bring the fight up to the Krell?" Jerkface asked. "Attack their base beyond the debris field, wherever it is? Why does nobody talk about that?"

"There are reasons," Cobb said. "And they're not for cadets. Stay focused on your current orders."

I frowned at that, acknowledging—grudgingly—that Jerkface had asked good questions. I looked over my shoulder at the green proliferation that was Alta. Another thing struck me as strange. Cobb was an expert pilot, and a First Citizen. He'd flown in the Battle of Alta. If reserves were needed, even the illusion of them, why hadn't he come up here *with* us?

We sat quietly for several minutes.

"So . . .," Bim said over the line. "Anyone want to help me pick a callsign?"

"Yeah," Jerkface said. "I need one too."

"I thought we already decided on yours, Jerkface," Nedd said.

“You *cannot* call your flightleader something embarrassing,” Jerkface said.

“Why not?” Hurl asked. “What was that famous pilot, with the name about gas or—”

“Broken Wind,” I said. “One of the First Citizens. She only recently retired, and she was an *amazing* pilot. A hundred and thirty career kills. An average of twenty engagements *a year*.”

“I’m *not* going by Jerkface,” Jerkface said. “That’s an order.”

“Sure thing,” FM said. “Jerkface.”

I smiled, looking out of my cockpit toward FM’s ship right beside mine. Had she known him before? I thought I could pick out a hint of an accent to her voice. The same one that laced the voices of the three boys—rich people accents, from the lower caverns. What was her story?

Lights continued to flash in the distance, and I found myself itching to grab the throttle, engage overburn, and send my ship blasting toward it. Pilots were fighting, maybe dying, while I just sat here? What kind of warrior was I?

*The kind that crashed into the mess hall the first time she turned on her engines.* I thought. Still, I watched those lights, tried to imagine the battle, and squinted to try to catch a glimpse of a Krell ship.

I was still shocked when I saw one streaking toward us.

I’d seen hundreds of depictions of their ships in art. Small, bulbous, it had a strangely unfinished look—with wires trailing behind like tails. It had a small, opaque black cockpit. Most Krell ships exploded completely when damaged or when they crashed, but in some few, we’d recovered burned-out remnants of the wicked armor they wore. Never an actual Krell though.

“Jerkface!” I said.

“Don’t call me—”

“Jorgen! Flightleader! Whatever! Look at your eleven, down about two hundred feet. You see that?”

He cursed softly.

Hurl said, “All right! The game is on!”

“It’s not a game, Hurl,” Jerkface said. “Instructor Cobb?”

“Here. What is it?”

“Krell ship, sir. It looks like it flew low, under AA gun range, and is heading for Alta.”

Cobb didn't respond immediately. I sat, sweating, hands on my controls, trailing that ship with my eyes.

"Flight Command knows about it," Cobb reported back. "Your replacements are climbing into their ships now. They should get here soon."

"And if they're not fast enough?" I asked. "What if that ship has a lifebuster?"

"Flight Command has visual ID on it, Spin," Cobb said. "The ship isn't a bomber. A single ship can't do that much damage."

"Respectfully, sir, I disagree," Jorgen said. "While the base is shielded, it could fire on the farmers with destructors, kill dozens before it's—"

"I know the capabilities of the damn Krell, boy. Thank you." Cobb took a deep breath. "It's close?"

"Yes, sir. Getting closer."

Silence over the line, then finally, "You may engage. But stay on the defensive. *No* grandstanding, cadet. I want you to distract it until the reinforcements get into the air."

I nodded, nervous sweat slicking the sides of my head, inside my helmet. I got ready to fly.

"I'm on it, sir!" Jerkface said. "Nedder, you're my wingmate!"

"Roger, Jorg," Nedd said.

Two ships broke out of our line. And before I knew it, I had grabbed my throttle and zipped after them.

"Spin," Jerkface said. "Back into line!"

"You need me," I said. "The more of us there are, the more likely we'll be to scare the thing off and back toward the real fighters!"

"And she'll need a wingmate," Hurl said, pushing out of line and tailing me.

"No, no!" Jerkface said. "Everyone else should stay in line!"

"Take her," Cobb said. "Hurl and Spin, you're with the flight-leader and his wingmate. But the rest of you hold position. I don't want you slamming into each other up there."

Jerkface fell silent. Together, the four of us flew in an intercept course, picking up speed, moving to cut in front of the enemy fighter before it could get too close to Alta. I was worried we wouldn't reach it in time, that it would zip right past us. But I needn't have been so worried.

Because the moment we drew close enough, it swooped around and came straight for us.

# 11

My pulse raced. My face went cold.

But I realized, in that moment, that I wasn't afraid.

I'd always worried that I would be. I *talked* big, I pretended like a champ. But how many fights had I *actually* been in? One or two scuffles with other kids when I was younger? Some sparring matches in judo classes?

A part of me had always worried that when I got into the sky, I'd panic. That I'd prove myself to be the coward everyone claimed I was. Like . . . like the lies said my dad had been.

But with a calm and steady hand, I eased up on the throttle and pulled into a turn, trying to position myself behind the enemy. I knew dogfighting techniques. I knew them backward and forward; I'd drawn them out in the margins of basically every set of notes I'd taken in class, regardless of the subject.

I was still hopeless. I made the curve *way* too wide, and Hurl nearly smashed into me because we had banked at different times.

"Wow," Hurl said as the two of us recovered. "This is harder than it seems, eh?"

The Krell ship chose Jorgen to attack, letting out a blast of glowing destructor fire. I tried to help, but my turn was too sharp this time. Jorgen, Nedd, and the Krell ship all zipped away behind me in a sequence of dogfighting maneuvers.

I blushed, feeling useless. I'd always assumed I'd just . . . well, take to this naturally. But I struggled to get my ship even pointed in the right direction.

The Krell pulled into position again behind Jerkface—who cursed softly, and then did a near-perfect twin-S dodge. Suddenly all of this became so

much more real to me. That was one of my flightmates. And the enemy was doing its best to kill him.

“Nice work, Jorgen,” Cobb said. “But be careful with those maneuvers in the future. If you fly too much better than your companions, the Krell will immediately target you. If they can identify flightleaders, they attack them first.”

“Shouldn’t they attack the weakest pilots first?” FM asked. “The easiest to kill.”

But that wasn’t the way the Krell thought. They always targeted the best pilots they could find, in an attempt to destroy our chain of command.

“I’ll explain later,” Cobb said, voice tense. “Nedd, you need to stick closer to Jorgen, if you can. Make the Krell have to worry about you tailing it if it tries to tail him.”

It was fortunate the Krell focused on good pilots, because Hurl and I would have made easy target practice. We could barely steer. Jerkface though . . . he performed a perfect Ahlstrom loop, almost losing the Krell ship.

Unfortunately, Jerkface’s next spin wasn’t as masterful—he performed it well, but when he pulled out of it, he ended up accidentally pointed toward the rest of the flight. I heard him curse over the radio as he tried to swerve, but that sent shots from the pursuing enemy ship right into our team.

They scattered, ships twisting in all directions. Bim clipped Morningtide, the quiet girl with the tattoos. Their ships bounced away from each other, but didn’t hit anyone else. A few destructor blasts hit Rig’s ship full on, but his shield held. He still screamed over the radio as the flashes of light rocked his Poco.

I gritted my teeth, heart thumping as Hurl and I managed—finally—to head in the right direction. But that meant we passed among the scattering ships, and *I* nearly collided with Bim this time.

Scud. I understood the admiral’s reasoning, but there was *no way* we should be up here fighting. At this rate, the only funeral pyres burned today would be our own. Poor Kimmalyln had leaned on her altitude controls, and had retreated some five hundred feet below us.

Jerkface barely kept ahead of the Krell, though he’d long since outpaced Nedd. I pushed the throttle forward, and my ship compensated briefly for the g-forces, but after a few seconds they hit me, pushing me back in the seat, making me feel heavier.

“Where are those reinforcements!” Jerkface said as the enemy fired on him, blasting at his shield.

“Any moment now,” Cobb said.

“I may not have a moment!” Jorgen said. “I’m going to try to get the ship to follow me up high so the AA guns can shoot it. Radio them.”

“Done,” Cobb said. “The Krell ship’s shield is still up, so you might have to keep it in AA-gun range long enough for the gunners to score several hits.”

“Okay . . . I’ll try . . . What’s this red flashing light on my dash?”

“Your shield is down,” Cobb said softly.

*I can save him.* I thought, desperate. *I have to save him!* The two had gained a lot of altitude. My only hope was to get there fast, to tail the Krell ship and shoot it down. So I pointed my ship’s nose up and slammed my throttle forward, hitting overburn.

The g-force *crushed* me downward as I flew up, and I felt myself grow heavier. It was the strangest sensation, far different from what I’d imagined. I could *feel* my skin pulling down, like it was going to slide off my face, and my arms grew heavy—making it difficult to steer.

Worse, a wave of nausea hit me as my stomach was pulled downward. Within seconds I started to black out.

*No . . .* I was forced to grab the throttle and pull it back, slowing my ship. I barely managed to keep from losing consciousness.

Below, the massive AA guns that protected Alta began firing, but they seemed clunky and slow compared to the zipping fighters. Explosions blasted the air behind Jorgen’s little Poco and the strange unfinished Krell ship. In a burst of light, an AA gun hit the Krell, breaking its shield, but it kept flying, right on Jorgen’s tail.

There was no way its next shot would miss him.

*No!*

At that moment, a single beam of pure light shot upward from below and pierced the Krell ship right through the center. It blasted apart in a flash of fire and debris.

Jorgen let out a long sigh. “Thank the reinforcements for me, Cobb.”

“That wasn’t them, son,” Cobb said.

“Oh!” Kimmalyn said. “Did I get it? I got it! Oh, are you okay, Jerkface?”



I frowned, looking down. That had been a shot from *Kimmaly*. She'd positioned herself lower and over to the side, not to escape, but to get a good shot at the enemy without having to fire through the rest of us.

I was, quite frankly, stunned. Jorgen sounded like he shared the emotion. "Scud!" he said. "Quirk, did you just snipe a Krell fighter from *long range*?"

Cobb chuckled over the radio. "Guess the file is right on you, Quirk."

"It's . . .," she began, but then sighed. "Never mind. Quirk it is. Anyway, yes, sir."

"What is this?" Jorgen asked.

"She's the daughter of AA gunners from Bountiful Cavern," Cobb said. "Historically, people with good accuracy on the smaller AA guns tend to make good pilots. The rotating seats in the small AA guns accustom one to moving and firing, and young Quirk here has some *very* impressive accuracy numbers."

"I wasn't even going to take the pilot's test, to be honest," she said in a conspiratorial tone. "But the DDF recruiters showed up and asked me for a demonstration, so I had no choice but to give it to them straight. 'The best modesty is shown while bragging,' as the Saint said. And after they told me I might be able to do it . . . well, I'll admit I did get a tad excited by the idea."

Suddenly her place among us made sense.

"Vocal sound off," Jorgen said, sounding shaken. "Status report, starting with anyone wounded."

"I . . .," Rig said. "I got hit."

"How hurt are you?"

"Just shaken," Rig said. "Though I . . . I threw up in my ship."

Hurl laughed hard at that.

"Rigmarole, return to base," Jorgen said immediately. "Morningtide, provide him with an escort. Everyone else into line."

We obeyed, now far more reserved. The banter died off as we watched the firefight in the distance, but soon our replacements came up around us and spelled us off. Cobb ordered us back to base, and we accompanied the other cadet flight that had been used as fake reinforcements.

We landed near Rig's and Morningtide's ships; the two of them had already left, perhaps to take Rig somewhere to sit and calm down. He could

get rattled easily; I'd have to find him and see if he needed someone to talk to.

As we climbed out of the ships, Hurl let out a whoop of excitement and ran for Kimmalyn. "Your first kill! If you hit ace *before* you're done with flight school, I'll hurl!"

Kimmalyn obviously didn't know what to do with the praise as the rest of us gathered around, holding helmets and congratulating her. Even Jerkface gave her a nod and a raised fist of acclaim.

I edged my way to him. That *had* been some awesome flying. "Hey, Jerkface . . .," I started.

He spun on me, and practically snarled. "You. We need to talk, cadet. You are in *serious* need of an attitude adjustment."

*What?* Right when I was going to compliment him? "Coincidentally," I snapped, "you are in *serious* need of a *face* adjustment."

"Is this how it's going to be? You insist on being a problem? Where did you get that flight suit anyway? I thought robbing corpses was illegal."

Scud. He might have pulled off some awesome flightwork, but that face . . . I *still* just wanted to punch him.

"You watch yourself," I said, wishing I had something to stand on to bring my eyes level with his. "When you are broken and mourning your fall from grace, *I* will consume your shadow in my own, and laugh at your misery."

"You are a *weird little girl*. Spin."

Little girl?

*Little girl?*

"I—"

"Attention!" Cobb shouted, limping up to our gathering.

*Little girl?*

I seethed, but—remembering how I'd been chewed out earlier—managed to keep my temper in check as I fell into line with the others. I pointedly *did not* look at Jerkface.

"That," Cobb said, "was somehow the most embarrassing *and* inspiring display I've ever seen out of cadets! You should be ashamed. And *proud*. Grab your packs from our training room, then meet me in epsilon hall of the flight school building for bunk assignments. You all need to hose down and grub up."

The other cadets rushed off. I tried to linger, to ask after Rig, but Cobb ordered me on ahead. Seemed he didn't like people waiting for him while he limped.

I still trailed after the others, feeling . . . well, like Cobb had said, actually. Both ashamed and proud.

I'd flown. I'd been in a battle. I . . .

I was *in the Defiant Defense Force*.

At the same time, my performance had been awful. For all my bragging and preparations, I'd been more of a liability than an asset. I had a lot of work to do.

And I *would* do it. I'd learn. I was a warrior, as Gran-Gran had taught me. And the warrior's way was not to run from failure, but to own up to it and *do better*.

As we walked down the building's hallways, the PA system cracked on. "Today's fight was an incredible victory," Admiral Ironsides said. "Proof of Defiant strength and tenacity. Remember what you fight for. Remember that if the enemy manages to get a lifebuster bomb into range, they can not only destroy this base, but everyone below, and everything we love. You are the line between civilization and madness.

"In particular, I'd like to acknowledge the new cadets of the as-of-yet-unnamed Cadet Flights B and C. Their first sortie proves that they, with possible exceptions, are a group to be admired."

*With possible exceptions*. Scud. How could the admiral of the entire DDF be *so petty*?

We walked to the classroom, where we'd left the packs of clothing we'd brought to Alta. As I swung my pack onto my shoulder, it banged into Hurl. The athletic girl laughed and made a wisecrack about how she'd almost crashed into me earlier, and I smiled. She seemed pumped up, rather than discouraged, by our performance.

As we walked toward the hallways with the cadet bunks, Hurl hung back with me so I wouldn't have to walk alone. Ahead, the others laughed at something Nedd said, and I decided I wouldn't let Ironsides get to me. I had my flight as my allies, and they seemed—Jerkface excepted—to be decent people. Maybe here, for the first time, I'd find a place where I would fit in.

We reached the cadet bunks, two hallways with rooms all along them—one hallway for the guys and a separate one for the girls. Everyone knew that there were strict no-romance rules during flight school; no funny

business was allowed until after graduation. Who had time for that anyway? Though I had to admit, Bim did look pretty good in a flight suit. I liked the blue hair too.

We went with the boys to check on Rig. Their room was almost as small as the one I shared with Mom and Gran-Gran back in Igneous. The small chamber had a stacked-up set of two beds on each wall. Arturo, Nedd, and Jerkface had plaques on their beds, and Rig was already in the fourth one. A cot had been pulled in for Bim, poor guy.

Rig was sleeping—well, probably pretending to, but that meant he wanted to be alone for now. So the girls and I walked back to our hall. We located the room assigned to us, and it was just as small and cramped. It had four beds like the boys' room, and each had a plaque saying who was to bunk there. Kimmalyn, Hurl, FM, and Morningtide, listed by their real names—but I preferred to think of them by their callsigns. Except maybe Kimmalyn. Did she really want to be known as Quirk? I'd have to talk to her about it.

Regardless, at the moment, I was distracted by something else. There was no bed or plaque for me. Not even a cot.

"Well, *that's* unfortunate," Kimmalyn said. "Guess you ended up with the cot, Spin. Once they bring it. I'll switch off with you every second night, if you want."

That girl was way too nice to be in the military.

So where was my cot? I looked down the hallway and saw Cobb limping up. Two men in military police uniforms stopped in the hall behind him, then lingered—not advancing on us, but also conspicuously waiting.

I trailed up to Cobb, leaving the others in the room. "Sir?"

"I tried. They won't listen." He grimaced. "No bunk for you. No meals in the mess hall."

"*What?*" I couldn't have heard him right.

"You are allowed in my classroom—I get ultimate say over that—but the rest of the DDF disagrees with what I've done. I have no authority over the facilities, and they've decided not to allocate resources to you. You can train, you can—fortunately—fly a Poco. But that's it. I'm sorry."

I felt my face grow cold, anger rising inside me. "How am I supposed to fly if I can't even *eat*?"

"You'll have to take meals down in Igneous," he said, "where your family requisition chits will work. You'll need to take the elevators down

each night, and then back up in the morning.”

“The elevators can take hours!” I said. “I’ll spend all my free time commuting! How am I supposed to be a member of the flight if I can’t live with the others? This is—This is—”

“Outrageous,” Cobb said, meeting my eyes. “Agreed. Will you give up, then?”

I took a deep breath, then shook my head.

“Good girl. I’ll tell the others you were denied a bunk because of some stupid internal politics.” He glanced at the MPs. “Those cheerful fellows will show you the way out of the complex, and make sure you don’t sleep on the street.” He leaned in. “It’s just another fight, Spin. I warned you. They won’t make this easy. I’ll watch for a chance to fix this. Until then, stay strong.”

Then he hobbled away.

I slumped against the wall, feeling like someone had cut my legs off. *I’m never going to belong.* I realized. *The admiral will make sure of it.*

The MPs took Cobb’s departure as their cue to approach. “I’m going,” I said, shouldering my pack and walking toward the exit. They trailed behind.

I wanted to say goodbye to the others, but . . . I didn’t want to explain. So I just left. I’d answer the questions in the morning.

Suddenly, I felt *exhausted*.

*Don’t let them see you bend.* I thought, walking straight-backed. The MPs escorted me out of the building—and down one hallway we passed, I was fairly certain I spotted Ironsides watching to see that I left.

Once I was outside flight school though, the soldiers left me. So much for making sure I didn’t sleep on the street. Maybe that was exactly what Ironsides wanted—if I could get arrested for loitering, she might be able to have me kicked out of the DDF.

I found myself pacing outside the building, not quite wanting to leave. Not wanting to abandon the others, and the sense of camaraderie I’d been imagining.

Alone. Somehow, I was still alone.

“I just can’t *stand* it, Cobb!” a voice said nearby.

Was that . . . Jerkface?

I inched closer to the building and looked around the corner. It was the back entrance to the school. And indeed, there was Jerkface standing near the doorway, talking to Cobb, who stood inside.

Jerkface threw his hands up. “How can I be flightleader if they don’t respect me? How can I give orders when they call me *that*? I have to beat it out of them somehow. Forbid it. Order them to obey.”

“Son,” Cobb said, “you don’t know much about the military, do you?”

“I’ve been training for this my whole life!”

“Then you should know. Respect doesn’t come with a patch or a pin. It comes from experience and time. As for the name, it’s started to stick, so you’ve got two valid options. Ignore it, roll with it, and hope it goes away—or embrace it and accept it, to take away the sting.”

“I *won’t* do that. It’s insubordinate.”

I shook my head. What a terrible leader.

“Kid . . .,” Cob began.

Jerkface folded his arms. “I have to get home. I’m expected for the formal dinner with the ambassador from Highway Cavern at nineteen hundred.” Jerkface walked out to an *extremely* nice-looking vehicle on the street. A private hovercar, with its own small acclivity ring? I’d seen them occasionally down below.

Jerkface climbed into the vehicle and started it up. The engine purred, somehow more primal than the smooth power of a booster.

*Scuuuuuuud*. I thought. *How rich is this guy?*

His family must have tons of merits to afford something like that. And that left him too rich to bunk with the others, it seemed. He pulled away in a smooth motion. It seemed distinctly unfair that the thing I was denied, he tossed aside like it was a bad bite of rat meat.

I shouldered my pack, then trudged off. I left through the gate in the walled DDF compound, where another set of MPs marked my passing on a notepad. Then I trudged down the wide street toward the elevators. My neighborhood was at the far edge of Igneous, so I really *would* spend hours and hours commuting this way. Maybe I could find someplace to stay nearer the elevators below?

It still made me feel sick. I walked to the elevator complex—but there were long lines, probably because of the problems they’d been having earlier. I braced myself for a wait, but then turned and looked to my left—beyond the buildings, beyond the fields. Though Alta Base itself had a shield and wall, this improvised town—full of farmers who were Defiant in another way—didn’t have a fence. And why would it need one? The only things out there were dust, rocks . . . and caverns.

A thought took me. It wasn't far . . .

I stepped out of the line to the elevators and walked outward, past the buildings, past the crops. Farmers working there glanced at me—but didn't say anything as I left the town behind. This was my *real* home: the caverns, the rocks, and the open sky. I'd spent more time here since Father's death than I had down in Igneous.

It was about a thirty-minute walk to the cavern with the crashed ship, but I found my way without too much trouble. The opening was smaller than I remembered, but I had my light-line and was able to lower myself.

The old ship looked more broken-down than I remembered. Perhaps it was because I'd just flown something new. Still, the cockpit was comfortable, and the seat reclined all the way.

It was a stupid idea. If debris fell above, I could get caught in a cave-in. But I was too hurt, too wrung out, and too *numb* to care.

So it was that—lying in the improvised bunk of a forgotten ship—I drifted off to sleep.

## 12

Waking up in the cockpit of a starfighter was basically the most incredible thing that had ever happened to me. Well . . . next to flying one.

I stretched in the darkness, impressed by how much room the cockpit had. It was larger than those of the DDF ships. I engaged my light-line for a little illumination and checked the clock. 0430. Two and a half hours until I needed to report for class today.

All things considered, I wasn't that tired. Just a little achy from—

Something was sitting and watching me from the inside rim of the cockpit.

The creature wasn't like anything I'd ever seen in the caverns. It was yellow, for one thing. Flat, long, and kind of blobby, it had little blue spikes along its back, making a pattern against its bright yellow skin. It looked like a big slug the size of a loaf of bread, but thinner.

I couldn't make out any eyes, but the way it folded up on itself—the front portion raised—reminded me slightly of a . . . a chipmunk? Like from the videos we'd watched in class of a few wildlife preservation caverns.

"What are you?" I asked softly.

My stomach growled.

"And, equally importantly," I added, "are you edible?"

It twisted its "head" sideways to look at me—though it still didn't seem to have any eyes. Or a mouth. Or, well, a face. It did let out a soft trill, a flutelike sound, from its back spikes.

If I'd learned anything from collecting mushrooms in the caverns, bright colors meant: "Don't eat me, or soon my brethren will be eating you, sapient one." Better to *not* put the strange cave slug into my mouth.



My stomach growled, but when I fished in my pack, I found only half of an old algae ration bar. I might have had barely enough time to get down to Igneous for food, but that would feel like . . . like slinking home, tail between my legs, beaten.

The admiral wanted to break me, did she? Well, she didn't know what she was up against. I was a world-class, highly trained, longtime expert *rat girl*.

I leaned my seat up and dug around in the back of the surprisingly spacious cockpit. Usually, every centimeter of room was needed in a fighter—though this one seemed to have a cargo spot behind the pilot's chair and what looked like a fold-out jump seat for a passenger.

Last night, I thought I'd seen some old tools in here. Sure enough, I found a coil of plastifiber rope. The sealed cockpit had preserved it, though this stuff was pretty much indestructible anyway. I uncoiled some and unwound it into string.

The slug thing remained on the control panel, watching me, occasionally tilting its "head" and making flute noises.

"Yeah," I said. "Well just you watch." I pushed the canopy open all the way—I hadn't dared close it last night, for fear that there wouldn't be ventilation—and jumped down. As I had hoped, I heard scuttling in the darkness and found rat droppings near some mushrooms along the wall.

I'd have preferred my speargun, but in a pinch, a snare would work—set with my ration bar as bait. I stepped back, pleased. The slug had moved onto the wing of the old ship, and it fluted at me in a way that I chose to hear as inquisitive.

"Those rats," I said, "shall soon know the wrath of my hunger, dispensed through tiny coils of justice." I smiled, then realized I was talking to a weird cave slug, which was a new low even for me.

Still, I had some time to kill, so I looked over the ship. Originally, I'd contemplated fixing the thing. After finishing my test, I'd daydreamed an entire future in which I brought my *own* ship to the DDF and *forced* them to take me.

Those imaginings now seemed . . . farfetched. This thing was *not* in good shape. Not just that bent wing, or the broken boosters at the back. Everything that wasn't in the cockpit was scratched up, warped, or ripped apart.

But maybe that was only the outside. If the guts were good, then perhaps the ship was fixable?

I fetched the toolbox. It had stood the test of time worse than the rope—it looked like a little moisture had gotten trapped in the box—but a rusty wrench was still a wrench. So I moved some rocks, then crawled in under the ship, near the acclivity ring. I knew some basic mechanics, like all the students, though I hadn't studied that as hard as I had flight patterns and ship layouts. Rig had always chided me, saying a good pilot should be able to repair her ship.

I hadn't ever imagined that I'd be in an old cavern, lit only by the red-orange glow of my light-line, trying to pry an access panel off an old piece of junk. I finally got the thing off and looked in, thinking back to my lessons.

*That's probably the booster intake and injection system, and that's got to be the stabilizer for the acclivity ring . . .*

There was a lot up in here that I didn't recognize, though I was able to locate the power matrix—the half-meter-wide box that was the ship's power source. I unhooked it with some difficulty, then crawled out and used my light-line to pull it from underneath the ship.

The wires that hooked it to the ship were in good shape, surprisingly. Whoever had built this thing had made the electronics to last. The power matrix also used the same plugs we did now—which were the types we'd used in the fleet, before crashing on Detritus. Maybe that could somehow help me place its age?

I crawled back down and looked into the bowels of the ship. *But what's this?* I wondered, rapping my knuckles on a large black box. Sleek, reflective despite the weight of years, it didn't seem to fit with the rest of the machinery. But then, who was I to say what did and didn't fit in a ship this odd?

On a whim, I opened up the tiny power matrix on my light-line, then plugged one of the smaller cords from the ship into it. A soft dinging came from the front of the ship, and a light turned on inside the access panel.

*Scud.* My light-line's power matrix was obviously too weak, but if I had a real power source I might be able to get some of the ship's functions running. It would still have a bent wing and broken boosters, but the idea was exciting to me. I looked back up into the ship's innards.

The slug was inside, wrapped around a cord and hanging there, staring down at me with a distinctly inquisitive posture.

“Hey now,” I said. “How did you get in there?”

It fluted a response. Was it the same slug, or another? I crawled back out and checked, but I couldn’t see any other slugs around. I *did* hear a scrambling from near the wall, where my snare had caught a decently meaty-looking rat.

“See?” I said, peeking down under the ship. The slug dropped onto the rocks there. “And you doubted me.”

I skinned, gutted, and stripped the meat from the rat. The toolbox had a small microwelder, and my light-line’s power matrix was more than enough for that. With it, and a piece of metal, I made a frying pan—and soon I had some rat cooking. No seasoning, but I also didn’t have to go hungry.

*I can use the lavatory at the school.* I thought. *They didn’t deny me that yesterday.* And the lavatory had cleansing pods for washing up after PT. I could get some mushrooms in the mornings, set up more snares, and . . .

And was I really planning to live like a cavewoman?

I looked down at the cooking rat. It was either live here, or commute every night like the admiral expected me to.

This was a way to control my life. They wouldn’t give me food or a bunk? Fine. I didn’t need their charity.

I was a Defiant.

## 13

Sure enough, when I got to the training building at 0630, the MPs didn't forbid me from going straight to the lavatory. I washed my hands, waiting for a moment when the other women were gone. Then I quickly stripped down, threw my clothes and underclothes in the clothing bay, and swung into the cleansing pod—a machine shaped roughly like a coffin, but with a hole on the small end.

The cycle took less than two minutes, but I waited until the lavatory was empty again before climbing out and retrieving my now-clean clothing. By 0650, I was seated with everyone else in our classroom. The others chatted animatedly about the mess hall's breakfast, which had included real bacon.

*I will let my wrath burn within me. I thought to comfort myself, until the day when it explodes and vengeance is mine! Until then, let it simmer. Simmer like juicy bacon on a hot skillet—*

Scud.

Unfortunately, there was a larger problem. It was 0700, and one of the mock cockpits was still empty. Rig was late again. How in the stars had he been early to class every day for the last ten years, yet managed to be late to *flight school* twice in a row?

Cobb limped in, then stopped beside Rig's seat, frowning. A few moments later, Rig himself darkened the doorway. I checked the clock, anxious, then did a double take. Rig had his pack over his shoulder.

Cobb didn't say a word. He just met Rig's eyes, then nodded. Rig turned to go.

"What?" I said, jumping to my feet. "*What?*"

"There's always one," Cobb said, "the day after the first battle. Usually that comes later in the training than it did for you all, but it always

happens.”

Incredulous, I chased after Rig, scrambling out into the hallway. “Rig?”  
He kept walking.

“Rig? What are you *doing*?” I ran after him. “Giving up after one little battle? I know you got shaken up, but this is our dream!”

“No, Spensa,” he said, finally stopping in the otherwise empty hallway. “That’s your dream. I was only along for the ride.”

“*Our* dream. All that studying, all that practice. *Flight school*. Rig. *Flight school!*”

“You’re repeating words like I can’t hear you.” He smiled. “But I’m not the one who doesn’t listen.”

I gaped.

He patted me on the shoulder. “I suppose I’m being unfair. I did always want to make it in. It’s hard *not* to get wrapped up in the excitement when someone close to you dreams so big. I wanted to prove to myself that I could pass the test. And I did.

“But then I got up there, Spensa, and I *felt* what it was like . . . When those destructors hit me, I knew. I couldn’t do that every day. I’m sorry, Spensa. I’m not a pilot.”

Those words made no sense to me. Even the sounds seemed strange leaving his mouth, as if he’d somehow switched to some foreign tongue.

“I thought about it all night,” he said, sounding sorrowful. “But I *know*. Spensa. Deep down, I’ve always known I wasn’t cut out for battle. I just wish I knew what I was supposed to do *now*. Passing the test was always the end goal for me, you know?”

“You’re washing out,” I said. “Giving up. Running *away*.”

He winced, and suddenly I felt awful.

“Not everyone has to be a pilot, Spensa,” he said. “Other jobs are important too.”

“That’s what they say. They don’t *mean* it.”

“Maybe you’re right. I don’t know. I guess . . . I need to think about it some more. Is there a job that involves only taking tests? I’m really good at that part, it turns out.”

He gave me a brief hug—during which I kind of stood there in shock—then walked off. I watched for a long while, until Cobb came out to get me.

“Dally any longer, cadet,” he said, “and I’ll write you up as being late.”

“I can’t believe you just let him go.”

“Part of my job is to spot which of you kids will best help out down here, instead of getting yourselves killed up there.” He shoved me lightly toward the room. “His won’t be the only empty seat when this flight graduates. Go.”

I walked back into the room and settled into my mockpit as the implication of those words sank in. Cobb almost seemed happy to send one of us away. How many students had he watched get shot down?

“All right,” Cobb said. “Let’s see what you remember from yesterday. Strap in, put on your helmets, and power on the holographic projectors. Get your flight into the air, flightleader, and prove to me it hasn’t all bled out your ears into your pillows. Then maybe I can teach you how to *really* start flying.”

“And weapons?” Bim asked, eager.

“Scud, no,” Cobb said. “You’ll just shoot each other down by accident. Fundamentals first.”

“And if we get caught in the air again, fighting?” Arturo asked. I still had no idea how to say his callsign. Amphibious? Something like that?

“Then,” Cobb said, “you’ll have to hope that Quirk will shoot them down for you, boy. Enough lip! I gave you cadets an order!”

I strapped in and engaged the device—but took one last look at Rig’s empty seat as the hologram went up around me.

We spent the morning practicing how to turn in unison.

Flying a starfighter wasn’t like piloting some old airplane, like a few of the outer clans used. Our ships not only had acclivity rings to keep us in the air—no matter our speed or lack thereof—starfighters had powerful devices called atmospheric scoops, which left us much less at the whims of wind resistance.

Our wings still had their uses, and the presence of atmosphere could be handy for many reasons. We could perform a standard bank, turning our ship to the side and swinging around like a bird. But we could also perform some starship-style maneuvers, like just *rotating* our ship the direction we wanted to go, then boosting that direction.

I got to know the difference intimately as we performed both maneuvers over and over and over, until I was *almost* tired of flying.

Bim kept asking about weapons. The blue-haired boy had an enthusiastic, genuine way about him, which I liked. But I didn't agree with his eagerness to shoot guns—if I was going to outfly Jerkface someday, I had to learn the fundamentals. Sloppy turns were exactly what had slowed me down in the skirmish yesterday. So if Cobb wanted me to turn, I'd turn. I'd turn until my fingers bled—until I rubbed the flesh from my hands and withered away to a skeleton.

A skeleton who could turn really, *really* well.

I followed the formation to the left, then jerked downward by reflex as Hurl turned too far on her axis and swooped too far in my direction. She smashed right into FM, whose invisible shield deflected the hit. But FM wasn't good enough to compensate for the shove, and she went spinning out of control the other direction.

Both went down, smashing into the rock surface in a pair of twin explosions.

"Scud," FM said. She was a prim one, with her golden boot latches and her stylish haircut.

Hurl, however, merely laughed. She did that a lot, enjoying herself perhaps too much. "Wow!" she said. "Now *that* was an explosion. How many points do I get for that performance, Cobb?"

"Points? You think this is a game, cadet?"

"Life is a game," Hurl said.

"Yes, well, you just lost all your points and died," Cobb said. "If you fall into an uncontrolled spin like that, eject."

"Um . . . how do I do that, again?" Nedd asked.

"Seriously, Nedd?" Arturo asked. "We went over this yesterday. Look at the lever between your legs. See the big *E* on it? What do you think that stands for?"

"I figured it meant *emergency*."

"And what do you do when there's an emergency? In a fighter? You . . ."

"Call you," Nedd said. "And say, 'Hey Arturo. Where's the scudding eject lever?'"

Arturo sighed. I grinned, looking out my window toward the next ship in formation—I could barely see the girl inside. Morningtide, her tattoo visible even with her helmet on. She glanced away sharply. Not even a smile.

*Fine.*

"Fly back in," Cobb said to us. "It's nearly time for lunch."

“Fly back in?” Bim complained. “Can’t we just turn off the holograms and go grab some grub?”

“Sure. Turn it off, get something to eat, then *keep walking* on back to where you came from—because I don’t have time for cadets who refuse to practice their landings.”

“Er, sorry, sir.”

“Don’t waste radio waves with apologies, cadet. Just follow orders.”

“All right, flight,” Jerkface said. “Standard spread, bank to heading 165.”

We obeyed, maneuvering back into a line, and flew toward the virtual version of Alta. “Cobb,” I said, “are we going to practice recovering our ship from an uncontrolled descent?”

“Not this again,” he said. “You’ll very rarely be in such a situation—and so, if you are, I want you trained to yank that eject lever. I don’t want you distracted by some bravado about saving your ship.”

“What if we *could* have saved it, sir?” Jorgen said. “Shouldn’t a good pilot do everything he or she can in order to protect their acclivity ring? They’re rare enough that tradition states we should—”

“Don’t quote that stupid tradition to me,” Cobb snapped. “We need good pilots as much as we need acclivity rings. If you are in an uncontrolled descent, you *eject*. You understand me?”

A few of the others gave verbal confirmation. I didn’t. He hadn’t contradicted the most important fact—that if a cadet ejected and scuttled their ship, they would never fly again. Maybe once I became a full pilot I could think about ejecting, but for now I was *never* pulling that lever.

Having this taken away from me would be basically the same as dying anyway.

We landed, and the holograms shut down. The others started to pile out of the room toward the mess hall for lunch, laughing together about how spectacular FM and Hurl had looked when they exploded. Kimmalyn noticed me hanging back in the room, and tried to stop—but Cobb gently steered her from the room after the others.

“I explained the situation to them,” he said, stopping in the doorway. “The elevators say you didn’t go down to Igneous last night?”

“I . . . I know of a little cave, about a half hour’s hike outside of town. I figured it would save time to stay there. I’ve spent my life scavenging in the tunnels. I feel more comfortable there.”

“Suit yourself. Did you bring in a lunch today?”



I shook my head.

“Do so from now on. I won’t have you distracted by hunger during training.” Then he left. Soon after, I heard voices in the distance. Laughter, echoing from the mess hall.

I considered getting in more training, but wasn’t certain I was allowed to use the machines without supervision. I couldn’t sit there and listen for an hour though, so I decided to take a walk. It was strange how exhausted I could feel from flying, yet still have so much nervous energy from sitting so long.

I exited the training building—noting the two MPs stationed in the hallway. Were they really there just to keep me from snatching a roll? That was a lot of resources for the admiral to expend to satisfy her rivalry with an insignificant cadet. On the other hand, if you were going to pick a fight, you should fight to win—and I had to respect that.

I left the DDF base and made my way to the orchard right outside the walls. Though there were workers here tending the trees, other people in uniforms walked among them, and benches had been set out along the path. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who enjoyed the presence of real plant life. Not fungus or moss, but actual trees. I wasted a good five minutes feeling the bark and picking at the leaves, half convinced the whole thing would be made of some highly realistic plastic.

I eventually stepped out and looked up at the debris field. As always, I could make out vast patterns, muted greys and lines in the sky, though it was too distant to see any specifics. A skylight was moving straight overhead, bright enough that I couldn’t look directly at it without my eyes watering.

I didn’t spot any holes through the debris. That one moment with my father was the only time I’d ever seen into space itself—there were just too many layers of junk up there, orbiting in different patterns.

What had the people been like, the ones who had built all of this? Some of the kids in my clan had whispered that Detritus was actually Old Earth, but my father had laughed at that notion. Apparently the planet was far too small, and we had maps of Earth that it didn’t match.

But they had been human, or at least they’d used our language. Gran-Gran’s generation—the crew of the *Defiant* and its fleet—had known Detritus was here. They’d come to the old abandoned planet intentionally. To hide, though the landing had been far more destructive than they’d

intended. I tried to imagine what it had been like for them. To leave the skies, to leave your ships, being forced to break into clans and hide. Had it been as strange for them to look up and see a cavern ceiling as it still was for me to look up and see the sky?

I continued to wander the orchard pathways. There was a certain rugged friendliness about the workers up here. They smiled at me as I walked past. Some gave me a quick, informal salute. I wondered how they'd react to hearing I was the daughter of Chaser, the infamous coward.

As I rounded the orchard and headed back toward class, I passed a number of people in suits and skirts getting an official tour of the orchards. That was the kind of clothing you saw on overseers below; people rich in merits who had been moved to deep caverns, the safer, better-protected locations that might survive a bomb. People like Jorgen and his cronies.

They seemed too . . . clean.

As I walked away, I spotted something curious: between the orchard and the base was a row of small vehicle hangars. The door to one of them was up, revealing Jerkface's hovercar peeking out. I glanced in, noting the polished chrome and baby-blue colorings. Cool, soft, and obviously *expensive*. Why stash it here, outside the base?

*Probably doesn't want the other cadets asking for a ride.* I thought. I resisted the urge to do something nasty to it. Barely.

I passed through the gate, then arrived at our training room before the others. I walked straight to my seat—already feeling like it had been too long since I'd been in a cockpit. I settled in, sighing, happy. I looked to the side, and found someone watching me.

I jumped practically to the ceiling. I hadn't noticed Morningtide by the wall as I'd entered. Her real name was Magma or Magna, I couldn't remember. Judging by the tray on the counter beside the Vician girl, she'd brought her food back here, and had eaten it alone.

"Hey," I said. "What did they have? Smells like gravy. Algae paste stew? Potato mash? *Pork chops*? Don't worry, I can take it. I'm a soldier. Give it to me straight."

She just looked away, her face impassive.

"Your people are descended from marines, right?" I asked. "On board the *Defiant*? I'm the descendant of people from the flagship myself—the engine crew. Maybe our great-grandparents knew each other."

She didn't respond.

I gritted my teeth, then climbed out of the seat. I stalked right over to her, forcing her to look me in the eyes.

“You have a problem with me?” I demanded.

She shrugged.

“Well, deal with it,” I said.

She shrugged again.

I tapped her on the collarbone. “Don’t taunt me. I don’t care how fearsome the Vician reputation is; *I’m* not going anywhere except up. And I don’t care if I have to step over your body to get there.”

I spun and walked back to my mockpit, settling down, feeling satisfied. I needed to show Jerkface a little of *that*. Spensa the warrior. Yeah . . . felt good.

The others eventually piled into the room, taking their positions. Kimmalynd sidled over. Her long, curly dark hair shook as she looked one way, then the other, as if trying to see if she was being watched.

She dropped a roll into my lap. “Cobb told us you forgot to bring a lunch,” she whispered. Then she stood up and walked the other way, speaking loudly. “What a lovely view of the sky we have! As the Saint always said, ‘Good thing it’s light during the day, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to see how pretty daytime is!’ ”

Cobb glanced at her, then rolled his eyes. “Buckle in,” he told the group. “Time to learn something new.”

“Weapons?” Hurl asked, eager. Bim nodded as he climbed into his seat.

“No,” Cobb said. “Turning. *The other direction.*” He said it completely straight, and when I snickered, he glared at me. “That wasn’t a joke. I don’t joke.”

*Sure you don’t.*

“Before we get to turn on the holograms,” Cobb continued, “I’m supposed to ask how you feel about your instruction so far.”

“What?” Nedd asked, squeezing his large frame into his cockpit. “Our *feelings?*”

“Yes, your feelings. What?”

“I’m just . . . surprised, Cobb,” Nedd said.

“Asking questions and listening is a big part of effective teaching, Nedder! So shut up and let me get on with it.”

“Um, yes, sir.”

“Flightleader! Your thoughts?” Cobb said.

“Confident, sir. They’re a ragtag bunch, but I think we can teach them. With your expertise and my—”

“Good enough,” Cobb said. “Nedder?”

“Right now, a little confused . . .,” Nedd said. “And I think I ate too many enchiladas . . .”

“Hurl!”

“Bored, sir,” she said. “Can we just get back to the game?”

“Two-headed-dragon-stupid-name!”

“Amphisbaena, sir!” Arturo said. “I honestly haven’t been highly engaged by today’s activities, but I expect that practicing fundamentals will prove useful.”

“Bored,” Cobb said, writing on his clipboard, “and thinks he’s smarter than he is. Quirk!”

“Peachy!”

“Pilots are never ‘peachy,’ girl. We’re spirited.”

“Or,” I added, “briskly energized by the prospect of dealing *death* to the coming enemies.”

“Or that,” Cobb said. “If you’re psychotic. Morningtide.”

“Good,” the tattooed woman whispered.

“Speak up, cadet!”

“Good.”

“And? I’ve got three lines here. Gotta write something.”

“I . . . I can’t bother . . . of much . . .,” she said, her voice heavily accented. “Good. Good enough, right?”

Cobb looked up from his writing board and narrowed his eyes. Then he wrote something on the board.

Morningtide blushed and lowered her gaze.

*She doesn’t speak English.* I realized. *Scud. I’m an idiot.* The old ships had represented various Earth cultures—of *course* there would be groups that, after three generations of hiding as isolated clans, didn’t speak my language. I’d never thought about it before.

“Bim?” Cobb asked next. “Boy, you have a callsign yet?”

“Still thinking!” Bim said. “I want to get it right! Um . . . my response . . . er, when do we learn weapons again?”

“You can have my sidearm right now,” Cobb said, “if you promise to shoot yourself. I’ll just write ‘eager to get himself killed.’ Stupid forms. FM!”

“Constantly amazed by the toxic aggression omnipresent in Defiant culture,” said the well-dressed girl.

“That’s a new one.” Cobb wrote. “Sure the admiral will love that. Spin?”

“Hungry, sir.” Also, I was stupid. Extremely stupid. I glanced again at Morningtide, and thought back to how she’d always seemed standoffish. That had a new context, now that I listened for the thick accent and the misspoken words. The way she’d looked aside when someone talked to her.

“All right, that’s done, finally,” Cobb said. “Buckle in and fire up the holograms!”

## 14

“You are the weakest point in our defenses,” Cobb said, walking through the center of the classroom, speaking to the nine of us in our seats, our holograms not yet engaged. “Your ship can accelerate at incredible speeds and make turns you can’t survive. It is far more capable than you are. If you die up there, it won’t be because the ship failed you. It will be because *you* failed *the ship*.”

A week had passed already, almost in a blur. Training each day in the simulations, doing time in the centrifuge, then sleeping each night in the cockpit of the ancient ship. I was beyond tired of unseasoned rat and mushrooms.

“G-forces are your biggest enemy,” Cobb continued. “And you can’t just watch your g-forces, you have to be aware of which direction they’re pushing on you. Human beings can take a reasonable amount of g-force backward, like when you’re going in a straight line.

“But if you pull up or do a hard bank, the g-forces will push downward, forcing the blood out of your head into your feet. Many people will g-lock—go unconscious—after pulling only nine or ten Gs that way. And if you turn on your axis, then boost another direction like we’ve been practicing . . . Well, you can easily push over a hundred Gs, enough to turn your insides to soup by the sudden jerk in momentum.”

Nedd raised his hand. “So, why did we learn those moves?”

“GravCaps,” I said.

Cobb pointed at me and nodded. “Your ships can compensate for sudden extreme g-forces. DDF vessels have things called Gravitational Capacitors. When you change direction or accelerate quickly, the GravCaps will engage and deflect the force. GravCaps can work for about three seconds before

needing a brief moment to recharge, so they're of most use when making tight turns."

I knew this already. In fact, Nedd probably would have known it, if he'd been forced to study for the test. So I let my mind wander, thinking of my broken-down ship. I hadn't made much progress on the ancient ship, as I'd spent most of my time hunting and curing rat meat. I still needed to find a power matrix somewhere . . .

"Your ships have three kinds of weapons," Cobb said.

Wait, weapons? My attention snapped back to the class, and I noted Bim also perking up. It was cute how he responded to any mention of weapons in an overeager-puppy sort of way.

"Yes, Bim," Cobb said. "Weapons. Don't wet yourself with excitement. The first of these three is your basic destructor—your primary weapon, but also your least effective. It shoots a concentrated beam of energy, and is usually fired in bursts at short range."

Cobb stopped near Kimmalyn's seat. "Or, less often, it can be charged for very precise long-range sniping. Most pilots only use this function for finishing off disabled ships, or perhaps picking off an enemy during an ambush. Hitting an active target at distance with a destructor requires incredible skill."

Kimmalyn grinned.

"Don't get cocky," Cobb said, walking on. "A destructor is practically useless against a shielded foe—though you'll still fire them at every opportunity, as it's human nature to hope for a lucky hit. I'll attempt to beat this out of you, but honestly, even full pilots cling to their destructors like they're scudding letters from their childhood sweetheart."

Bim chuckled.

"That wasn't a joke," Cobb snapped. "Holograms on."

We powered up the devices, and suddenly we were on the launchpad. Once we were up in the air and had done verbal confirmations, Cobb's voice crackled in my helmet's speaker. "All right. Stars help us, it's time for you to start shooting. The destructor trigger is the button next to your index finger on the control sphere. Go ahead."

I hesitantly pressed the button. A burst of three white-hot blasts shot in rapid succession from the pencil nose of my ship. I grinned and pressed it again and again, firing bursts one after another. Just like that, I was granted the very power over *life and death*! And for more than rats!

“Don’t wear it out, Spin,” Cobb said. “See the dial on your throttle? The one you can rotate with the thumb of your left hand? That’s the destructor rate control. Top position is steady fire. It’s loved by every drooling, meathead, idiot pilot who *didn’t* train with me.”

“What about those of us who are still drooling, meathead idiots?” Nedd asked. “But *did* train with you?”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Nedder,” Cobb said. “I’ve never seen you drool. Second position on the dial is burst. Third position is a charged long-range shot. Indulge yourselves. Get it out of your system.”

He made a bunch of Krell ships appear in the air in front of us. They didn’t fly or move; they simply hung there. Target practice? I’d *always* wanted to do target practice—ever since I’d been a little girl, throwing rocks at other, more nefarious-looking rocks.

Together, we launched a hailstorm of death and devastation through the air.

We missed.

We missed by what seemed like *miles*. Even though the ships weren’t that far away. I gritted my teeth and tried again, switching between different destructor modes, angling my ship with my control sphere, firing with everything I had. But scud . . . for how close everything *looked*. there sure was a lot of empty space to shoot.

Jerkface finally got a hit, knocking one of the ships down in a spray of fire. I grunted, focusing on a single vessel. *Come ON*.

“Go ahead, Quirk,” Cobb said.

“Oh, I thought I’d give them a chance, sir!” Kimmalyyn said. “ ‘Winning isn’t always about being the best,’ you know.”

“Humor me,” Cobb said.

“Well, okay.” Her ship charged for a couple of seconds, then released a focused line of light—which blasted a Krell ship from the sky. She repeated the feat again, and again, and then did it a fourth time.

“Kind of like trying to hit the floor with a rock, sir,” she said. “They aren’t even moving.”

“How?” I asked, in awe. “*How* did you learn to shoot like that, Quirk?”

“Her father’s training,” Hurl said. “Remember? The story with the mushroom that looked like a squirrel?”

FM laughed, and I even heard a peep out of Morningtide. But no, I didn’t know any stories about mushrooms or squirrels—it had to be a story they’d



chatted about at night, in the bunks. While I was walking back to my cave.

I pressed hard on my destructor button, and managed—remarkably—to finally hit one of the targets. The way it sprayed sparks as it fell was immensely satisfying.

“All right,” Cobb said. “That’s enough of that stupidity. I’m shutting down your destructors.”

“But we only just got them!” Bim said. “Can’t we do a little dogfighting or something?”

“Sure, all right,” Cobb said. “Here you go.”

The remaining Krell fighters—the dozen or so we hadn’t managed to shoot down—suddenly came streaking toward us, destructors blazing. Hurl let out a whoop, but I snapped into focus and dove out of the way.

Kimmalyn went down first, in an immediate flash of light and sparks. I dove into a twirling spin, watching the red line on my canopy that indicated in the real world how much g-force I’d be feeling. Cobb was right—the GravCaps protected me when I did a quick turn, but I had to be careful not to run them out midturn, then slam myself with all that g-force.

I pulled up, and fire and explosions surrounded me, debris from the ships of other cadets raining down.

“We’ve tried to reverse engineer Krell technology,” Cobb said in a calm voice, a striking contrast to the insanity around me. Nedd screamed as he was hit. Morningtide went down quietly. “But we have failed. They have better destructors and better shields. That means, fighting them, you’re outgunned *and* outarmored.”

I was consumed entirely with survival. I swerved, dodged, and spun. Three Krell ships—*three*—swooped in on my tail, and one hit me with a destructor shot. I cut right hard, but another shot took me, and the warning light started flashing on my control panel. Shield down.

“You’ll have to hit a Krell a half dozen times to bring down their shields,” Cobb said. “But they will do the same to you with two or three hits.”

I pulled up into a loop. Blasts marked the deaths of my companions—flares in the dim sky. Only one other ship was still flying, and I knew—without needing to see the numbers on the fuselage—that it would be Jorgen. He was a way better pilot than I was.

That still grated on me. I growled, spinning in that wide loop, trying to get one of the enemy into my sights. Almost . . . there . . .

My controls went dead. The ship stopped responding. During that loop, I'd redlined the g-forces, and the GravCaps had run out. Though my body couldn't feel it here, if I'd been in an actual ship I'd have passed out.

A Krell ship disposed of me with a passing—almost offhand—shot, and my hologram fuzzed. Then my canopy vanished, and I was in the classroom. Jorgen managed to last another seventeen seconds. I counted.

I sat back in my seat, pulse thumping rapidly. That had been like witnessing the end of the world.

"Let's assume you were approaching competence," Cobb said. "A remarkable fantasy, I realize, but I'm ever an optimist. If you managed to fly better than the average Krell ship, you'd still be at a severe disadvantage using only destructors."

"So we're screwed?" FM said, standing up.

"No. We just have to fight differently—and we have to even the odds somehow. Strap back in, cadet."

She did, and the holograms started again with us in the sky in a line. The Krell ships reappeared in a silent formation in front of us. I eyed them more suspiciously this time, index finger itching to spray them with destructor fire.

"Dragon-boy," Cobb said to Arturo. "Press the buttons next to your third and fourth fingers. Hit them both at once."

My ship shook, and a little *pop* of light exploded from Arturo, like a radiant splash of water.

"Hey!" Hurl said. "My shield is down."

"Mine too," said Kimmalyn.

"And mine," Arturo added.

"Mine's up," Jerkface said, as did several others.

*Arturo's shield went down.* I thought, *as did those of the two ships next to him in line.* I leaned forward, looking out the cockpit canopy, keenly interested. In my days of studying, I'd been taught booster specs, flight patterns, acclivity rings—basically everything about the fighters *except* weapon specifics.

"The IMP," Cobb said. "Inverted Magellan Pulse. It will completely negate any protective shield a ship emits—including, unfortunately, your own. It has an extremely short range, so you'll basically have to be crawling into a Krell's engines before you activate it.

“The key to beating the Krell is *not* to pound them with destructor shots. It’s to outmaneuver them, team up against them, and outthink them. Krell fly individually. They barely support one another.

“You, instead, will fight in traditional wingmate pairs. You’ll work to engage the IMP in a way that gives your wingmate a clear, unshielded shot. But you also always need to be aware—engaging the IMP leaves you exposed and vulnerable until you reignite your shield.”

A sudden burst of light from nearby sent FM cursing softly.

“Sorry!” Morningtide said with her thick accent. “Sorry, sorry!” It was the most I’d heard out of her all day.

“What’s the third weapon?” Jerkface said.

“Light-lances,” I guessed. I’d read the term, but again, the specifics on what they did weren’t covered in the books.

“Ah, so you know about them, Spin,” Cobb said. “I thought you might. Give us a little display.”

“Um, okay. But why me?”

“They work very similarly to their smaller cousins: light-lines. I have a hunch you’ve got some experience there.”

How did he know? I wore my light-line to class, as I needed it to get in and out of my cavern, but I thought I’d kept it hidden under the long sleeve of my jumpsuit.

“Thumb and little finger,” Cobb said, “buttons on either side of the control sphere.”

Well, sure. Why not? I pushed the throttle forward and moved out of line, approaching the hovering Krell ships. I picked one, the wires at its rear floating down behind it. Like all ships, it had an acclivity ring—with a standard size of about two meters in diameter—glowing with a soft blue light underneath.

The Krell looked even more sinister up close. It had that strange, unfinished feel to it, though it wasn’t actually incomplete. Those wires hanging from the back were probably intentional, and its design was simply alien. Not unfinished, but made by creatures that didn’t think like humans did.

I held my breath, then clicked the buttons Cobb had indicated. A line of molten red light launched from the front of my ship and attached to the Krell ship. As Cobb had indicated, it worked just like the light-line, but larger—and launched from my ship like a harpoon.

Wow. I thought.

“Light-lances,” Cobb said. “You’ve probably seen their smaller cousins on the wrists of pilots; they were used by the engineering department in the old fleet to anchor themselves while they worked on machines in zero gravity. Spin has one, somehow—which I’ve decided not to mention to the quartermaster.”

“Thank—”

“You can thank me by shutting up when I’m talking,” Cobb said. “Light-lances work like a kind of energy lasso, connecting you to something you spear with it. You can use it to attach to an enemy ship, or you can use it on the terrain.”

“The terrain?” Arturo asked. “You mean we stick ourselves to the ground?”

“Hardly,” Cobb said.

The sky exploded above and I looked up, gasping, as the ubiquitous haze of debris began to rain down balls of fire. Superheated metal and other junk, turned into falling stars by the heat of reentry.

I quickly spun my ship, then pushed on the throttle and moved back toward the line. It took a few minutes for the debris to start falling around us, some chunks glowing more brightly than others. They moved at a variety of speeds, and I realized some of the falling junk had acclivity stone glowing blue inside it, giving it some lift.

The junk smashed into several of the Krell fighters, pulverizing them.

“The Krell usually attack during debris falls,” Cobb said. “The Krell don’t have light-lances, and though they tend to be maneuverable, a DDF ship with a good pilot can outpace and outfly them. You’ll often engage them in the middle of the falling debris. In there, the light-lance will be your best tool—which is why we’re going to spend the next *month* training on them. Any idiot with a finger can fire a destructor. But it takes a *pilot* to fly the debris and use it as an advantage.

“I’ve seen pilots use the light-lances to pull Krell into one another, stick them to space junk, or even yank a wingmate out of danger. You can pivot unexpectedly by attaching yourself to a big chunk and swinging around it. You can toss debris at your enemy, instantly overwhelming their shield and smashing them. The more dangerous the battlefield, the more advantage the better pilot will have. Which, when I’m done, will be *you*.”

We watched the debris fall, burning light reflecting against my canopy. “So . . .,” I said. “You’re saying that by the end of our training, you expect us to be able to use *grappling hooks made of energy* to smash our enemies with *flaming chunks of space debris*?”

“Yes.”

“That . . .,” I whispered, “that’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.”

## 15

I tied off the set of wires—working by red-orange glow in the otherwise dark cavern—then wrapped them in tape. *There.* I thought, stepping back and wiping my brow. Over the last few weeks, I’d managed to find a working power matrix in an old water heater at an Igneous recycling facility. I knew the guy who worked there, and he let me trade him rat meat to look the other way as I did some salvaging.

I’d also retrieved some supplies from one of my hidden dumps outside Igneous. I’d made a new speargun, and had fashioned a kitchen that had a real hot plate, a dehydrator, and some spices. I’d stopped by my home to fetch Bloodletter, my old stuffed bear. He made a fine pillow. It had been good to see my mother and Gran-Gran, though of course I hadn’t told them I was living in a cave.

“Well?” I asked Doomslug the Destroyer. “Think it will work?”

The little yellow-and-blue cave slug perked up on the rock nearby. “Work?” she fluted.

She could imitate noises, but there was always a distinctly fluty sound to what she said. I was pretty sure she was just mimicking me. And to be honest, I didn’t know if “she” was a she—weren’t slugs, like, both or something?

“Work!” Doomslug repeated, and I couldn’t help but take that in an optimistic light.

I flipped the switch on the power matrix, hoping my little hot-wire job would hold. The diagnostic panel on the side of the old ship flickered, and I heard a strange sound coming from the cockpit. I hurried over and climbed onto the box I used as a ladder to get in.

The sound came from the instrument panel—it was low, kind of industrial. Metal vibrating? After I listened for a moment, it changed tone.

“What is *that*?” I asked Doomslug, looking to my right and—as expected—finding her there. She could move very quickly when she wanted to, but seemed to have an aversion to doing so when I was watching.

Doomslug cocked her head to one side, then the other. She shivered the spines on her back and imitated the noise.

“Look how low the lights are.” I tapped the control panel. “This power matrix isn’t big enough either. I’ll need one made for a ship or a building, not a water heater.” I turned it off, then checked the clock on my light-line. “Keep an eye on things while I’m gone.”

“Gone!” Doomslug said.

“You don’t have to act so excited about it.” I quickly changed into my jumpsuit, and before I left, I took another glance at the ship. *Fixing this thing is way beyond me.* I thought. *So why am I trying?*

With a sigh, I hooked the end of my light-line to a rock, threw it up to smack against a stone near the entrance to my cave, then grabbed hold and hauled myself up to the crevice so I could shimmy out and head to class for the day.

\* \* \*

Roughly an hour and a half later, I shifted my helmet—which was chafing my head—then grabbed my ship controls and buzzed past an enormous floating piece of debris. In real life that would have been dropping in a fiery blaze, but in the hologram Cobb had suspended the chunks in midair for us to practice on.

I was getting pretty good at dodging between them, though I wasn’t certain how well that skill would translate once they started—you know—*hurtling down from above with horrific destructive potential.* But hey, baby steps.

I launched my light-lance, which burst from a turret on the underside of my ship. A glowing line of red-orange energy speared the large piece of space junk.

“Ha!” I said. “Look at that! I *hit* it!”

After I flew past the chunk, however, the light-lance grew taut, and my momentum caused me to pivot. My ship spun on the line—setting off my GravCaps—then slammed into a different chunk of floating debris.

When I was younger, we'd played a game with a ball on a string, connected to a tall pole. If you pushed on the ball, it would spin around the pole. The light-lances were similar, only in this game, the debris was the pole and *I* was the ball.

Cobb sighed in the ear of my helmet as my hologram went black upon my death.

"Hey," I pointed out, "at least I *hit* the thing this time."

"Congratulations," he said, "on that moral victory as you die. I'm sure your mother will be very proud, once your pin is sent back to her as a melted piece of slag."

I huffed and sat up, leaning out of my cockpit to look toward Cobb. He walked through the center space in the room, speaking into a hand radio to communicate with us through our helmets, even though we were all right next to each other.

The ten mockpits made a circle, and the floor in the center had its own projector, one that spat out a tiny reproduction of what we were experiencing. Eight little holographic ships buzzed around Cobb, who watched us like some enormous god.

Bim slammed straight into a piece of debris near Cobb's head, and the shower of sparks looked kind of like our instructor had suddenly had a really great idea. Perhaps the realization that the lot of us were worthless.

"Zoom out your proximity sensors, Bim!" Cobb said. "You should have seen that piece floating there!"

Bim stood up out of his hologram and pulled off his helmet. He ran his hand through his blue hair, looking frustrated.

I pulled back into my cockpit as my ship reappeared at the edge of the battlefield. Morningtide was there, hovering, watching the others flit between chunks of metal. It looked like Gran-Gran's descriptions of an asteroid field, though of course it was in atmosphere, not up in space. We usually engaged the Krell at a height of somewhere between ten thousand and forty thousand feet.

Bim's ship appeared near us, though he wasn't in it.

"Morningtide!" Cobb said. "Don't be timid, cadet! Get in there! I want you to swing from so many scudding lines of light that you get rope burns!"



Morningtide flew timidly into the field of debris.

I shifted my helmet again; it was seriously bothering me today. Maybe I needed a break. I turned off my hologram and stood up out of my seat to stretch, watching Cobb as he inspected a run that Jerkface was doing with Nedd as a wingmate. I put my helmet on my seat, then walked over to Morningtide's hologram.

I peeked in, my head appearing as if in the top of her cockpit. She was huddled inside, an intense look on her tattooed face. She noticed me, then quickly took off her helmet.

"Hey," I said softly. "How's it going?"

She nodded in Cobb's direction. "Rope burns?" she asked softly, with her thick accent.

"It's when you rub your hand on something so fast, it hurts. Like if you scrape yourself on carpet—or on ropes. He just wants you to practice more with the light-lance."

"Ah . . ." She tapped her control panel. "What was he said before? About prox . . . proximation?"

"We can zoom the proximity sensors," I said, speaking slowly. I reached down and pointed at a toggle. "You can use this to make the sensor range bigger? Understand?"

"Ah, yes. Yes. Understand." She smiled thankfully.

I gave her a thumbs-up and pulled out of her hologram. I caught Cobb glancing at me, and he seemed approving, though he quickly turned away to yell at Hurl—who was trying to get FM to bet her dessert on the outcome of the next run.

Perhaps it would have been easier for Cobb to explain himself better, but Morningtide *did* seem to understand most of the instruction. She was merely embarrassed about what she misunderstood, so I tried to check in on her.

I settled into my seat, then felt around inside my helmet, trying to figure out what was bothering me. *What are these lumps?* I thought, prodding the inside of the helmet. Maybe the size of a requisition chit or a large washer, the round lumps were underneath the inside lining of the helmet, and each had a small metal portion at the center, sticking through the lining. Had those been there before?

"Problem, cadet?" Cobb asked.

I jumped; I hadn't seen him approach my mockpit. "Um, my helmet, sir. Something's wrong with it."

"Nothing's wrong, cadet."

"No, look. Feel in here. There are these—"

"Nothing's wrong, cadet. Medical ordered your helmet swapped out this morning, before you arrived. It has sensors to monitor your bioreadings."

"Oh," I said, relaxing. "Well, I suppose that makes sense. But you should tell the others. It might distract some of the flight if their—"

"They only swapped out *your* helmet, cadet."

I frowned. Only mine? "What . . . kind of readings are they taking about me, then?"

"I wouldn't want to guess. Is this a problem?"

". . . I suppose not," I said, though it made me uncomfortable. I tried to read meaning into Cobb's expression, but he was stoic as he met my eyes. Whatever this was, he obviously wasn't going to tell me. But I couldn't help feeling that it had something to do with my father, and the admiral's dislike of me.

I pulled on the helmet, activating the radio and then my hologram. "Bim!" Cobb said in my ear, acting as if nothing had happened. "You knitting a sweater or something? Back into your seat!"

"If I have to," Bim said.

"*Have* to? You want to go sweep floors instead of being a fighter pilot, boy? I've seen rocks that fly almost as well as you do—I could drop one in your seat, paint the head blue, and at least I'd stop getting lip!"

"Sorry, Cobb," Bim said. "No lip intended, but . . . I mean, I talked to some cadets from Firestorm Flight this morning. *They've* been dogfighting this entire time."

"Good for them! When they're all dead, you can move into their room." Cobb sighed—loudly, in an exaggerated way. "Here, let's try this."

A set of glowing golden rings appeared on the battlefield. They were just larger than a ship, and several were dangerously close to floating chunks of debris.

"Line up and confirm," Cobb said.

"You heard the man!" Jerkface said. "Fall in at my mark!"

The eight of us flew to Jerkface's ship and settled into a line, then gave him verbal confirmation.

"Flight ready, instructor!" Jerkface said.

“Here are the rules,” Cobb said. “Each ring you pass through gets you one point. Once you begin a run, you have to maintain a speed of at least Mag-1, and you can’t circle around if you miss a ring. There are five rings, and I’ll let you each do three runs through the course. Highest score gets two desserts tonight—but a warning, if you crash, you’re out with your score frozen where it was before you died.”

I perked up and tried not to dwell on the idea that the prize was useless to me. At least this might distract me from the uncomfortable helmet.

“A *game*.” Hurl said. “Like, you’re actually going to let us have *fun*?”

“I can have fun,” Cobb said. “I know all about having fun. Most of it involves sitting and dreaming of the day when you all stop asking me stupid questions!”

Nedd chuckled.

“That wasn’t a joke!” Cobb said. “Go.”

Hurl whooped and hit her overburn, zipping toward the debris field. I responded nearly as fast, accelerating to Mag-3, and almost beat her to the first ring. I flew through it right behind her, then glanced at my radar. Bim, FM, and Morningtide were on my tail. Arturo and Nedd flew in formation, as they often did. I expected Kimmalyn to be last, but she actually flew ahead of Jerkface—who delayed for some reason.

I focused on the course, racing through the next ring. The third one was practically behind a big chunk of debris. The only way through it at speed would be to use a light-lance to turn extra sharp.

Hurl whooped again and executed a near-perfect hook turn through the ring. I made the tactical decision to shoot past it—which proved wise as Bim tried to pivot through it, and smashed right into the chunk of debris.

“Scud!” he yelled as his ship exploded.

*Jerkface still hasn’t started the course.* I noted.

I made the fourth ring—it hovered between two hunks of debris—but missed the last one, which was behind a large floating metal box, requiring a light-lance turn to spin around it. I ended that run with three points, though Hurl got four. I hadn’t counted the others. Poor Kimmalyn crashed getting through the fourth ring.

The rest of us curved around the outside of the debris field for another run, and Jerkface finally flew in for his first run. *He was watching to see us go through.* I realized. *He was scouting the battlefield.*

Clever. Indeed, he got four rings like Hurl.

Hurl immediately raced in for her second run, and I realized that—in our eagerness—we’d been going several times faster than Cobb’s stated minimum speed. Why would we want to fly faster? Simply to get done first? Cobb hadn’t offered any points for that.

*Stupid.* I thought. *It isn’t a race. It’s a test of precision.* I slowed down to Mag-1 as Hurl—trying to hook that third ring again for the sharp turn—lost control and slammed herself into a nearby chunk of rock.

“Ha!” she exclaimed. She didn’t seem to care that she’d lost. She just seemed happy that there was a game to it now.

I focused on the third ring, going over and over in my head the things Cobb had taught. As I swooped past, I launched my light-lance into the asteroid and not only hooked it, but—to my surprise—swung around on the energy line so that I curved right through the ring.

Bim whistled. “Nice one, Spin.”

I released the light-lance and pulled up.

“You wanna try this one, Arturo?” Nedd asked as the two of them flew toward the third ring.

“I think our chances of victory are higher if we skip that ring each pass.”

“Too bad!” Nedd said, then hooked *Arturo* with his light-lance and pulled him after, diving for the ring.

Of course they both crashed. I hit the fourth ring easily, zipping between the two flying chunks of debris. But I missed the fifth one, spearing only air with my light-lance.

“Nedd, you idiot,” Arturo said in my ear. “Why did you do that?”

“I wanted to see what would happen,” Nedd answered.

“You wanted . . . Nedd, it was *obvious* what would happen. You just got us both killed!”

“Better here than the real world.”

“Better *neither*. Now we won’t win.”

“I never eat my *first* dessert though,” Nedd said. “Bad for the bod, my friend.”

The two went on bickering over the radio. FM, I noticed, didn’t try either of the difficult rings—she stuck to the three that were easier.

I gritted my teeth, focusing on the contest. I *had* to beat Jorgen. It was a matter of *honor*.

He finished his second run with four points again, making the third ring but skipping the last one, which was hardest. That put him at eight points,

and me at only seven. FM, playing it safe, would be at six. I wasn't sure about Morningtide, but she tried the last ring and missed, so I was probably ahead of her.

The four of us remaining swooped around for our final run. Again, Jerkface hung back, waiting for the rest of us to go first. *Fine*. I thought, hitting overburn and zipping through the first ring. I had to hit *every* one of these to have a chance. FM, notably, didn't try to fly through even the first ring. She just zoomed carefully over the top of the course.

"FM, what are you doing?" Cobb asked.

"I figure these clowns will all get themselves killed, sir. I could probably win without any points at all."

*No*. I thought, streaking through the second ring. *He said we keep our points if we crash—we merely can't get any more*. So she wouldn't win, careful or not. Cobb had accounted for that.

I approached the third ring, hands sweating. *Come on . . . Go!* I launched the light-lance and hit the debris square-on, but didn't push into the throttle the right way, so I ended up swinging around, but missed the ring.

I gritted my teeth, but disengaged the light-lance and managed to pull out of the turn without smashing into anything. Morningtide tried the ring, and almost made it, but ended up crashing. Jerkface still waited outside, watching to see exactly how many rings he'd need to win. *Clever. Again*.

Scud, I hated that boy.

I was so distracted that I actually missed the fourth ring, which was one of the easy ones. Furious, my face growing cold, I used my light-line to spear the big square piece of debris, then spun downward—curving straight through the fifth ring, which so far as I'd seen, nobody had hit.

That left me with a total of ten points, while Jerkface was at eight. He would close that gap easily. I felt my anger boil as he finally started toward the course. Who did he think he was, sitting back there like some ancient king, watching the plebes scramble before him? He was so arrogant. But worse, he'd been *right* to wait. He'd been smarter than I had, and he'd gained a distinct advantage. He was going to win.

Unless . . .

A terrible idea took root in my mind. I spun and hit my over-burn, accelerating to Mag-5 and sprinting back toward the starting line. Above me, Jerkface went through the first ring at a leisurely pace, at exactly the minimum speed.

“Hey, Spin?” Nedd asked. “Whatcha doing?”

I ignored him, turning upward, dodging through floating pieces of debris. Ahead of me, Jerkface approached the second ring, an easy one—and the one that would bring him to ten points.

*Straight on . . .*, I thought, overburning. Pushing my acceleration to the red line of where—in a climb like this—I’d risk dropping unconscious.

“Spin?” Bim asked.

I grinned. Then smashed my ship *right into* Jerkface’s, overwhelming both shields and blowing us to pieces. We exploded into light.

Then we both re-formed at the edge of the battlefield.

“What the *hell* was that?” Jerkface shouted. “What were you *thinking*?”

“I was thinking how to win,” I said, sitting back in my seat, satisfied. “The way of the warrior, Jerkface.”

“We’re on a *team*. Spin!” he said. “You brash, *self-centered*. slimy piece of—”

“Enough, Jorgen,” Cobb snapped.

Jerkface fell quiet, but notably didn’t give his usual obsequious “Yes, sir!”

The holograms switched off, and Cobb walked over to my seat. “You’re dead.”

“I won anyway,” I said.

“It’s a tactic that would be useless in a real fight,” Cobb said. “You don’t get to take home points if you’re dead.”

I shrugged. “You set the rules, Cobb. Ten points for me, nine for Jerkface. It isn’t my fault that he doesn’t get to try for the last few points.”

“Yes it is!” Jerkface said, standing up out of his cockpit. “It *absolutely* is *your fault*!”

“Enough, son,” Cobb said. “It’s not worth getting worked up over this. You lost. It happens.” He glanced at me. “Though I guess I’ll be wanting to change the rules of that game.”

I stood up, grinning.

“Five-minute break,” Cobb said. “Everyone cool down and don’t strangle one another. That causes too much damn paperwork.” He hobbled over to the door and stepped out, perhaps to fetch his midday coffee.

Kimmalyn ran over to my seat, her dark curls bouncing. “Spin, that was *wonderful*!”

“What does the Saint say about games?” I asked.

“ ‘You can’t win if you don’t play,’ ” Kimmalyn said.

“Obviously.”

“Obviously!” She grinned again. Bim walked by and gave me a thumbs-up. Over his shoulder, I saw Jerkface glaring at me with unmitigated hostility as Arturo and Nedd tried to calm him down.

“Don’t worry, Jorg,” Nedd said. “You still beat Arturo.”

“Thank you *very much*. Nedd,” Arturo snapped.

Kimmalyn left the classroom to get something to drink, and I settled into my seat and dug one of my canteens out of my pack. I made sure to refill all three each day at the bathroom.

“So,” Bim said, leaning against my hologram projector, “you’re really into warriors and things, eh?”

“They inspire me,” I said. “My grandmother tells stories about ancient heroes.”

“You have any favorites?”

“Probably Beowulf,” I said, then took a long pull of water from the canteen. “He literally slew a dragon, and ripped the arm off a monster—he had to resort to his bare hands after his sword wouldn’t cut the thing. But then there’s Tashenamani—she slew the great warrior Custer—and Conan the Cimmerian, who fought in the ancient times before writing.”

“Yeah, they were great,” Bim said, and winked. “I mean . . . I hadn’t heard of them until now. But I’m sure they were great. Er. I’m thirsty.”

He blushed and walked off, leaving me confused. What was . . .

*He was . . . he was flirting with me.* I realized, stunned. *Or, well, trying to.*

Was that possible? I mean, he was actually cute, so why would he . . .

I looked at him again, and caught him in the middle of what seemed like a blush. Scud! That was the strangest thing that had happened to me since starting flight school, and I spent my mornings talking to a slug.

I thought about guys, but my life hadn’t exactly left me time for that kind of thing. The last time I’d had any romantic inclinations had been when I’d been eight and had given Rig a particularly nice hatchet I’d made out of a rock and a stick—then had decided he was gross the next week. Because, well, I’d been eight.

I jumped to my feet. “Uh, Bim?” I said.

He looked at me again.

“You ever heard of Odysseus?”

“No,” he said.

“He was an ancient hero who fought in the greatest war that ever happened on Earth, the Trojan War. It’s said he had a bow so strong that, other than him, only a giant could pull the string back. He . . . had blue hair, you know.”

“Yeah?” Bim asked.

“Pretty cool,” I said, then immediately sat down, taking a long gulp from my canteen.

*Was that smooth? That was smooth, right?*

I wasn’t sure what Sun Tzu or Beowulf would say about flirting with cute guys. Maybe share the skulls of your enemies with them, as a gesture of affection?

I felt kind of warm and gooey (in a good way) until I spotted Jerkface—across the room—watching me. I gave him a hard glare.

He, pointedly, turned to Nedd and Arturo. “I guess we shouldn’t expect real honor,” he said, “from the daughter of Zeen Nightshade.”

A bolt of coldness shot through me.

“Who?” Nedd asked. “Wait, who did you say she was?”

“You know,” Jerkface said, voice loud enough to carry through the entire room. “Callsign: Chaser? The Coward of Alta?”

The room went quiet. I could *feel* everyone’s eyes turning toward me. How had he found out? Who had told him?

I stood up. Scud, even *Kimmaly*n seemed to know who Chaser was. Her canteen dropped from her fingers and bounced against the floor, spilling water that she didn’t notice.

“Who?” Morningtide asked. “What is happen?”

I wanted to flee. Hide. Escape all those eyes. But I *would not run*.

“My father,” I said, “was *not* a coward.”

“I’m sorry,” Jerkface said. “I’m only stating the official history.” He stared at me, with that arrogant, so-punchable face. I found myself blushing in embarrassment—then in anger.

I shouldn’t feel embarrassed. I’d lived practically my entire life with this mantle. I was accustomed to those looks, those whispers. And I wasn’t ashamed of my father, right? So why should I care that the others had found out? Good. Fine. I was happy to be Chaser’s daughter.

It was just that . . . it had felt nice. To be able to make my own way, without standing in anyone’s shadow.



That thought made me feel like I was betraying my father, and that made me even *more* angry.

“She lives in a cave, you know,” Jerkface said to Arturo. “She goes there every night. The elevator operators told me they watch her hike out into the wilderness, because she’s not—”

He cut off as Cobb stepped in with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. Cobb focused immediately on me, then Jerkface. “Back to your seats,” he snapped at us. “We still have work to do today. And Quirk, did you drop that canteen?”

Kimmalyn unfroze and picked up her canteen, and everyone climbed into their cockpits without another word. At one point shortly after we went back to practicing with our light-lances, I caught Cobb looking at me with a grim expression, with eyes that seemed to be saying, *It was going to happen eventually, cadet. Are you going to give in?*

Never.

But that didn’t stop me from feeling sick through the whole set of drills.

A few hours later, I trailed out of the women’s bathroom, canteens refilled. A new pair of MPs walked me to the doors and saw me out, then—like normal—left me there.

I trudged across the base grounds, feeling frustrated, angry, and alone. I should have kept going out of the base, on toward my cave. But instead I took a path around the training building, one that let me walk past the mess hall.

I looked through the window there and spotted the others seated along a metal table—chatting, laughing, arguing. They’d even bullied Jerkface into joining them tonight—a rare treat for the plebes, as he usually drove off to the exclusive elevator. Nedd said it could reach the lower caverns in under fifteen minutes.

So there he was, enjoying what I was forbidden, after tossing away my secret like a fistful of expired rations. I hated him. In that moment, I kind of hated them all. I almost hated my father.

I stalked off into the night, leaving the base through the front gates. I turned to my left, toward the orchard, and the shortcut through it toward the wilderness. My path took me straight past the small hangars where Jerkface parked his hovercar.

I stopped there in the darkness, eyeing his bay. The front door was closed this time, but the side door was open, and I could see the car inside. It took me all of about half a second to come up with another really terrible idea.

Looking around, I didn't see anyone watching. Darkness had come early tonight, the skylights moving away, and the orchard workers had already gone home. I was far enough from the front gates of the base that the guards there shouldn't be able to see me in the gloom.

I slipped in the side of the small hangar and closed the door, then lit my light-line for a bit of illumination. I found a wrench on the wall of the small shed, then pulled open the hood of the blue hovercar.

Jerkface could walk home tonight. It would only be fair. After all, *I* had to walk home—and tonight I would have to do it while lugging a large, car-size power matrix tied to my back.

## 16

I woke up the next morning groggy and sore, with a face full of stuffed bear. I groaned, turning over, my muscles aching. Why did I hurt so much? Had I . . .

I bolted upright and flipped on my light-line bracelet, peering out of my cockpit bed. The light illuminated my little kitchen, a pile of mushrooms waiting to be sliced, some rocks I'd placed as seats there, and . . .

And a car's power matrix, the size of a small nightstand.

It lay where I'd dumped it after lugging it all the way to the cavern. I'd been so worn out after that, I hadn't plugged it in, but had climbed right into bed.

I groaned and flopped back, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms. I'd been so angry last night that . . . well, I hadn't been thinking clearly. Stealing the power matrix had seemed like a *great* idea—but now the holes in my clever plan were stark.

*Gee, I wonder who vandalized your car, Jerkface? Could it be the only one of us who wasn't at dinner, and who had immediate and powerful reasons for wanting revenge on you?*

When it became known that I'd destroyed another cadet's property, I'd get tossed out of flight school so fast, I'd get whiplash. I groaned again, a sound that was unhelpfully mimicked by Doomslug, who had snuggled into a spot on the dash.

Why? Why couldn't I stay focused? Why did I have to let them get to me? Beowulf or Xun Guan wouldn't let themselves be goaded into acting this stupid!

I felt sick as I trudged to Alta that morning. I didn't even have the will to try out the power matrix. As if there were anything I could do to prevent my

doom at *this* point. Why couldn't "rational Spensa" and "determined Spensa" get together for a battle briefing once in a while?

I fully expected the MPs to be waiting for me, but the guards at the gates just waved me through. Nobody stopped me on my way to the classroom. Jerkface came in while I was settling down in my seat, and he didn't so much as glance at me. Cobb limped in and started class like normal.

At one point during a break, I managed to catch Jerkface's eyes. He met them and didn't look away. There was a challenge in them, yes. But how was I to read this? Was he waiting for some specific point to turn me in?

As the day progressed, and we practiced using the light-lances on moving targets, I started to wonder if maybe he *wasn't* going to get me into trouble. Maybe . . . maybe he was taking the warrior's way. Rather than running to the admiral for help, was he planning his own vengeance?

If that was true, then . . . scud. I might have to give that boy a little respect.

Not much, mind you. He'd still aggressively and maliciously branded me a coward in front of the others. Arturo, Nedd, FM, and even Bim trod more softly around me, peering at me out of the corners of their eyes. It didn't seem to affect our training, but during our breaks everyone was dancing around the news. They asked me about other things, then exited conversations quickly.

The only one who didn't act odd was Kimmalyn. That didn't mean she ignored what had happened, of course.

"So," she said, hovering beside my seat as I rested and drank from my canteen, "is *that* why you're always so bellicose?"

"Bellicose?" I asked, unfamiliar with the word.

"So willing to seize the stars with one hand and shove them in your pocket," Kimmalyn said. She leaned in, as if the next part were somehow naughty. "You know. Heated."

"Heated."

"Maybe even . . . once in a while . . . cross."

"Is my father why I'm such a mess of anger, bravado, and temper? Is the fact that they call him a coward the reason I walk around with my sword in hand, screaming that I'll make a pile of everyone's skulls, then stand on that to help me behead the people who were too tall for me to reach?"

Kimmalyn smiled fondly.

"Bless my stars?" I asked her.

“Every single one of them, Spensa. Every single bouncing star.”

I sighed and took another drink. “I don’t know. I remember liking Gran-Gran’s stories even before he was shot down, but what happened certainly didn’t help. When everyone looks at you as the coward’s daughter—not *a* coward’s daughter, but the *singular* Coward’s Daughter—you develop an attitude.”

“Well, bless you for standing up straight,” she said, then put up her fists. “Pride is a virtue in those who make it one.”

“Said the Saint.”

“She was a very wise woman.”

“You realize none of us have any idea which Saint you’re talking about.”

Kimmalyn patted me on the head. “It’s okay, dear. You can’t help being a heretic. The Saint forgives you.” From someone else that might have been offensive, *particularly* with the head pat. From Kimmalyn it was just . . . well, somehow comforting.

By the end of the day, I was feeling a ton better. So much so, in fact, that I felt only *mild* nausea when they left me for dinner. So that was good.

Outside, I spotted Jerkface getting into a long, black hovercar that had a driver wearing white gloves. Poor boy. Looked like he had to get a ride home now.

I walked back to my cave with a spring in my step, chewing on some smoked rat. I would eventually have to pay some kind of vengeance bill to Jorgen, but I could do that. *Bring it on*. For now, I appeared to have gotten away with a serious crime. One starfighter-size power matrix, ready to go.

I grinned as I arrived at my crevice, then lowered myself on my light-line into the cavern. It was a silly thing to have risked my future over; this ship was so old, it wasn’t like getting lights working was going to do any good. But it was also my secret, my discovery.

*My ship.*

Broken, worn out, with a bent wing . . . it was still mine.

I hauled the matrix into position beside the ship’s access hatch. The plugs were the same, so I didn’t have to worry about hot-wiring it. I glanced at Doomslug—who inched over along the wing toward me—then grinned and plugged it in.

The lights sprang to life on the diagnostic panel and—judging by the glow from up front—on the dash inside the cockpit. The low humming tone

from before started up again, then sped up, warping until it . . . until it became *words*.

“ . . . MMMEERGENCY BOOTUP PROCEDURES INITIATED,” a masculine voice said from the cockpit. It spoke with a strange, old-timey accent, like I’d heard on the broadcasts of famous speeches from the days before we’d founded Alta. “SEVERE DAMAGE TO STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY AND DATA BANKS DETECTED.”

Was it a recording? I scrambled over to the cockpit.

“Hello!” the voice said to me, growing less . . . mechanical. “I assume from your clothing and attitude that you are a native of this locale. Would you kindly categorize yourself—stating your national affiliations and the names of your ancestors—so I might place you in my data tables?”

“I . . .” I scratched my head. “What in the stars?”

“Ah,” the voice said. “Excellent. Minimal linguistic deviation from Earth Standard English. Forgive the slowness of my processing—which doesn’t quite seem up to normal benchmarks—but you *are* human, yes? Could you tell me . . . where am I?”

The words were lost on me. I simply knelt there, on the wing by the cockpit, trying to put together what was happening.

My *ship* was *talking to me*.

## 17

“My designation is MB-1021, robotic ship integration,” the ship said.

It didn’t just talk—it seemed to have trouble stopping.

“But humans prefer ‘names’ to designations, so I am commonly referred to as M-Bot. I am a long-distance reconnaissance and recovery ship, designed for stealth operations and unsupported solo missions in deep-space locations. And . . .”

The machine trailed off.

“And?” I asked, lounging in the cockpit, trying to figure out what in the stars this thing was.

“And my data banks are corrupted,” M-Bot said. “I cannot recover further information—I can’t even retrieve my mission parameters. The only record I have is the most recent order from my master: ‘Lie low, M-Bot. Take stock, don’t get into any fights, and wait for me here.’”

“Your master was your pilot, right?” I asked.

“Correct. Commander Spears.” He summoned a fuzzy image for me, which briefly replaced the scanner display on his dash. This Commander Spears was a clean-cut, youngish man with tan skin and a crisp, unfamiliar uniform.

“I’ve never heard of him,” I said. “And I know *all* the famous pilots, even from Gran-Gran’s days in the fleet. What was up with the Krell when you came here? Had they attacked the galaxy yet?”

“I have no recollection of this group, and the word *Krell* doesn’t appear in my memory banks.” He paused. “Reading the decay rate of isotopes in my memory core indicates that it has been . . . one hundred seventy-two years since I was deactivated.”

“Huh,” I said. “The *Defiant* and its fleet crashed on Detritus about eighty years ago, and the Krell War started some distant time before that.” Gran-Gran said the war had been going on a long time when she’d been born.

“Considering human life spans,” M-Bot said, “I must conclude that my pilot has perished. How sad.”

“Sad?” I asked, trying to wrap my mind around this. “You have *emotions*?”

“I am allowed self-improving and independently reinforcing memory pathways, for the simulation of organic emotions. That allows me to have better interaction with humans, but I am not actually alive. My subroutines for emotional distress indicate I should feel for the loss of my master, but the memory banks recording his appearance—and our history together—are damaged. I remember nothing more than his name and his final command.”

“Lie low,” I repeated. “Take stock, and don’t get into any fights.”

“The only portion of my memory banks that seems to have survived intact—other than basic personality routines and things like general language usage—is an open database for recording fungoid life forms on this planet. I should very much like to fill the rest of it in.”

“Fungoid?”

“Mushrooms. Would you happen to have any I can categorize?”

“You’re a hyperadvanced stealth fighter that—somehow—has a machine personality built into it . . . and you want me to bring you *mushrooms*?”

“Yes, please,” M-Bot said. “Take stock. As in categorize local life forms. I’m certain that’s what he meant.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said. “It sounded like you were supposed to hide from something.” I leaned out the side, looking at his wings. “You have large twin destructor emitters on each wing, along with a light-lance turret underneath. That’s as much firepower as our larger ships. You’re a warship.”

“Clearly not,” M-Bot said. “I’m here to categorize fungi. Didn’t you listen to my last orders? I am *not* supposed to get into fights.”

“Then why do you have guns?”

“For shooting large and dangerous beasts who might be threatening my fungus specimens,” M-Bot said. “Obviously.”

“That’s stupid.”

“I am a machine, and my conclusions are therefore logical—while yours are biased by organic irrationality.” He made a few lights on his dash blink.



“That is a clever way of saying you are the stupid one, in case you—”

“I understood,” I said. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome!”

He sounded utterly sincere. But he was . . . what, a “robotic integration”? Whatever that was. I wasn’t sure how far I could trust his honesty.

Still, he was a machine with a memory—albeit damaged—that stretched back hundreds of years. This could be a solution, maybe, to the questions we’d always asked. Why did the Krell keep attacking us? What were they, *really*? Our only depictions of them were reconstructions based on the armor they wore, as we’d never been able to take one of them captive.

We’d probably once known the answers to these questions, but if so, we’d lost them eighty years ago. Soon after crashing here—and presuming themselves safe—the majority of the officers, scientists, and elders from our old fleet had gathered in an underground cavern. They’d recovered the old electronic archive from the *Defiant*, and had been holding an emergency meeting. That was when the first lifebuster had been dropped, destroying our archives—and with them, most anyone with seniority in the fleet.

That was when the remnants of our people had broken into clans based on their duties in the fleet. Engine maintenance workers like Gran-Gran and her family. Hydroponics crew—glorified farmers—like Bim’s ancestors. Foot soldiers like Morningtide’s. They’d learned, through difficult trial and error, that if they kept to small groups of under a hundred people, the Krell sensors couldn’t find them hiding in the caves.

Now, three generations later, here we were. Slowly fighting our way back onto the surface—but with enormous holes in our memories and history. What if *I* could bring the ultimate secret to the DDF: the solution for defeating the Krell once and for all?

Though . . . it was unlikely M-Bot had that answer. After all, if the old human fleets had known how to defeat the Krell, they wouldn’t have been driven to near extinction. But surely there were *some* secrets hidden inside this machine’s mind.

“Can you fire your weapons?” I asked.

“I’m commanded to avoid fights.”

“Just answer,” I said. “Can you fire?”

“No,” M-Bot said. “The weapons systems are locked out of my control.”

“Then why would your pilot order you not to get into any fights? You aren’t capable of fighting anyone.”

“Logically, one isn’t required to be able to *finish* a fight in order to *start* one. I am allowed minimal basic autonomous movement, and could theoretically stumble into a battle or a conflict. This would be disastrous for me on my own, as I require a pilot for most important functions. I can assist and diagnose, but as I am not alive, I cannot be trusted with destructive systems.”

“So *I* could fire them,” I said.

“Unfortunately, weapons systems are offline from damage.”

“Great. What else is offline?”

“Other than my memories? Boosters, acclivity ring, cytonic hyperdrive, self-repair functions, the light-lance, and all mobility functions. Also, my wing appears to be bent.”

“Great. So, everything.”

“My communications features and radar are functional,” he noted. “As are cockpit life support and short-range sensors.”

“And that’s it?”

“That . . . appears to be it.” He was silent for a moment. “I can’t help noticing—through the aforementioned short-range sensors—that you are in possession of a few *mushrooms*. Might you be willing to place those in my cockpit analyzer for cataloguing?”

I sighed, resting back in my seat.

“At your leisure, of course. I, being robotic, have no concept of fragile things like human impatience.”

*So what do I do?*

“But soon would be nice.”

*I doubt I can fix this thing on my own.* I thought. Should I just go to the DDF and tell them what I’d found? I’d have to reveal that I’d stolen that power matrix. And, of course, they’d never let me keep this ship for myself. Going to the DDF with it would essentially mean wrapping this vessel up with a bow, then presenting it to the very admiral who was trying her best to ruin my life.

“They do look like nice mushrooms.”

No. I was *not* going to give this discovery to Ironsides, at least not without more thought. But if I was going to try to repair this ship, I’d at least need help.

“Not that I require affirmation of any sort, as my emotions are mere simulations . . . but you *are* listening to me, right?”

“I’m listening,” I said. “I’m just thinking.”

“That is good. I should not like to be maintained by one who lacks brain functions.”

It was at that moment that I had my *third* terrible idea in not so many days. I grinned.

Maybe there was a way to get some help on the repairs. Someone who had way more “brain functions” than I had.

Approximately an hour and a half later—well after curfew—I was hanging upside down by my light-line outside Rig’s window on the third floor of his apartment complex in Igneous. He was snug inside, sleeping in his bunk. He had his own little closet of a room, which I’d always found luxurious. His parents had been deemed exemplary in all six parental metrics, and had been granted housing for multiple children, but—ironically—Rig was the only one they’d ever ended up having.

I knocked on his window, hair dangling below my head as I hung there. Then I knocked again. Then a little louder. Come on; it hadn’t been *that* long since I’d last done this.

Finally, the sleepyhead sat up, light through the window—from my light-line—outlining his pale face and bleary eyes. He blinked at me, but didn’t seem the least bit surprised as he walked over and slid the window open to the side.

“Hey,” he said. “Took you long enough.”

“Long enough?”

“To come try to talk me into coming back. Which I’m not going to do. I don’t have everything figured out, but I’m still sure that my decision to—”

“Oh, shut up about that,” I whispered. “Grab your jumpsuit. I need to show you something.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“This is *serious*,” I said. “You’re going to *flip your boots* when you see it.”

Infuriatingly, he just leaned on the windowsill, looking out at me as I was hanging there upside down—which was *not* easy, mind you. “It’s almost midnight, Spin.”

“This will be worth it.”

“You’re going to drag me off to some cavern, aren’t you? I won’t be back until like two or three.”

“If you’re lucky.”

He took a deep breath, then grabbed his jumpsuit. “You *do* realize that you’re the weirdest friend I’ve ever had.”

“Oh, come on. Let’s not pretend you have other friends.”

“Strange,” he said, “that my parents never managed to give me a sibling—but I *still* somehow ended up with a sister who gets me into trouble all the time.”

I grinned. “Meet you down below,” I said, then I paused. “Flip. Your. Boots. Rig. Trust me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Give me a minute to sneak past my parents.” He pulled the drapes closed, and I let myself down to the street below, where I waited impatiently.

Igneous was a strange place at night. The apparatus worked all hours, of course. *Day* and *night* were just words here, though we still used the terms. There was a mandatory quiet cycle—during which the cavern loudspeakers didn’t play any announcements or speeches—and a curfew for those who weren’t on last shift. But nobody paid attention to you as you walked the streets if you kept to your own business. The default assumption in Igneous was that everyone was going about something useful.

Rig met me down at street level as promised, and we walked through the cavern—passing the mural of a thousand birds in flight, each one divided in half by a line, the two halves slightly offset from each other. The birds soared from a red-orange sun, which you couldn’t even see up above.

Our cadet’s pins got us past the guards and into the tunnels. As we walked one of the easier paths, Rig filled me in on what he’d been doing the last few weeks. His parents were happy he’d washed out; everyone knew how dangerous being a pilot was.

“They’re proud, of course,” Rig said, grunting as he climbed some rubble with me. “Everyone treats me really strangely once they see the pin. Like, they listen to what I say, and tell me my ideas are good—even if they aren’t. And people make way for me, like I’m someone important.”

“You are.”

“No, I’m the exact same amount of important I was before.” He shook his head. “But I’ve got a dozen different job offers waiting for me, and I’ve got two months to decide.”

“*Two months?*” I repeated. “Without a job or school? Just free time?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Vmeer keeps trying to push me toward politics.”

“Politics,” I said, almost stopping in the tunnel. “*You.*”

“Tell me about it.” He sighed and sat down on a nearby rock. “But what if she’s right? Shouldn’t I listen to her? Everyone else thinks politics is the best thing you can do with your life. Maybe I should do what they say.”

“What do *you* want, though?”

“*Now* you care about that?” he asked.

I winced, and Rig looked away, blushing deeply. “I’m sorry, Spin. That wasn’t fair—I haven’t been fair. To you, I mean. *I* chose to study for the pilot’s test; you didn’t make me. And yes, your dreams kind of consumed my own—but that’s mostly because I didn’t have any dreams. Not really.”

He slumped on his rock, back to the wall, looking up at the tunnel ceiling. “I keep thinking, what if it happens again? What if I let myself get excited about a job, then discover I’m *completely* unsuited to it? I’ve failed at flying, right? So maybe I’ll just keep failing?”

“Rig,” I said, taking him by the arm. “The problem isn’t that you’re going to be unsuited to what you pick. The problem is what it’s always been. That you’re simply too scudding great at too many different things.”

He looked up at me. “Do you really believe that, Spin?”

“Sure do. I mean yeah, you decided flying wasn’t for you—but I think if you have a flaw, it’s not that you fail too often. It’s that you refuse to admit what everyone sees. The fact that you’re incredible.”

He smiled. And seeing Rig smile felt *good*. It reminded me of our days as kids, when an outcast and a kid who was bullied had made friends against the odds.

“You’re going to drag me into something again, aren’t you?” he asked. “Something ridiculous?”

I hesitated. “Yeah . . . Probably.”

“All right,” he said, standing up. “I guess I’m in. Let’s go see this surprise of yours.”

We continued on, climbing until I led him, finally, out a gap onto the surface. I pulled him over to the entrance to my improvised home, then made him hold on to me as I lowered us down inside, as—well—the chances that he’d slip and fall were pretty good. He really was amazing at a ton of things . . . but I’d seen him drop no fewer than eight books on his toes while studying this past year.

“This had *better* not be something to do with rats, Spin,” he said as we landed. “I know you go crazy for them, but . . .”

I turned up the light on my light-line, illuminating the ship. As if in coordination with my reveal, M-Bot turned on his dash and running lights. I’d cleared away much of the rubble, and with the lights, the ship didn’t look half bad. Broken, yes, with a bent wing. But *distinctly* different from anything we had in the DDF.

Rig gaped at it, his jaw dropping practically to the floor.

“Well?” I said. “What do you think?”

In response he sat down on a nearby boulder and—still staring at the ship—pulled off his right boot, then flipped it over his shoulder.

“Well,” I noted, “I said *boots*. plural. But I’ll take it.”

## 18

I didn't get much sleep that night.

I spent a few hours helping Rig look over M-Bot—he wanted to check each bit of damage. Eventually though, I started to get bleary-eyed. Rig was still going strong, so I rolled out a mat and used Bloodletter for a pillow.

Every time I dozed off, I'd eventually wake to hear Rigmarole speaking to the ship. "So . . . you're a machine, but you can *think*."

"All machines 'think,' in that they execute responses to input. I am simply far more complex in my executable responses, and in the inputs I can recognize . . ."

More dozing.

". . . can explain to us what is wrong?"

"My memory banks are faulty, so I cannot offer more than cursory explanations—but perhaps those will be sufficient."

I turned over on my side, and dipped back down into sleep.

". . . do not know where I originated, although a fragment of a memory implies I was created by human beings. I am not certain whether other species of sapient life exist. I believe I could answer that once . . ."

Around six in the morning, I rubbed my eyes and sat up. Rig lay below an open access panel, fiddling with something underneath the ship. I flopped down next to him, yawning. "So?"

"It's incredible," he said. "Have you told Cobb about it?"

"Not yet."

"Why delay? I mean, what if this thing can make the difference in fighting the Krell?"

"Theoretically," I said, "humans had this thing when they first fought the Krell. It didn't help then."

"I would note," M-Bot said, "that 'it' is listening."

"And?" I asked the ship, yawning again.

"And it's generally considered bad form for humans to speak of one who is present as if they are not."

"I can't make you out, M-Bot," Rig said, sitting up. "You say you don't care about things like that, right?"

"Obviously I don't. I'm a logical machine with only a thin veneer of simulated emotions."

"Okay," Rig said. "That makes sense."

"It's still rude," M-Bot added.

I looked to Rig, then gestured toward the cockpit. "So, we have a magical talking starship with mysterious technology. Do you wanna help me fix it?"

"On our own?" Rig asked. "Why?"

"So we can keep it. And *fly* it."

"You're in the DDF now, Spin! You don't need an outdated, broken-down ship."

"Still here," M-Bot noted. "Just saying."

I leaned forward. "Rig, I'm not in the DDF. I'm in Cobb's class."

"So? You'll graduate. I don't care *how* few people he passes—you'll be one of them."

"And then?" I asked, feeling cold—expressing a fear that I'd never voiced, but one that had haunted me since that first day. "Cobb says he can let anyone he wants into his class. But *if* I pass? His authority ends there, Rig."

Rig looked down at the wrench in his hand.

"I'm worried that the admiral will deny me a ship," I said. "Worried she'll find some petty reason to kick me out, once Cobb can't protect me anymore. Worried I'll lose it, Rig. The sky." I looked toward the ship, glowing with lights along its side. "This is old, yes, but it's also my freedom."

He still looked skeptical.

"Think about how fun it would be," I said. "Poking around inside an ancient ship. Think of what mysteries we could discover! Maybe M-Bot is all outdated technology, but maybe not. Won't it be fun to at least *try* to fix him on our own? If it doesn't work out, we can always turn him in later."

"Fine," Rig said. "All right, stop giving me the hard sell. I'll try, Spin."

I grinned at him.



Rig looked at the ship. “I worry this is beyond what we can do. Those boosters are ruined. We can’t just weld something like that back together. I’m sure there will be other parts that will need to be replaced, or fixed using tools we don’t have.” He thought for a moment. “Though . . .”

“What?” I asked.

“One of my job offers,” he said. “It’s from the elite Engineering Corps, the people who oversee repairing the starfighters—and the people who develop new designs. They’ve got the best labs, the best equipment . . .”

I nodded, eager. “That sounds *perfect*.”

“I was thinking of taking their offer anyway,” he said. “They told me I could come in these next two months, intern with them, learn my way around the shops . . . They were *very* impressed with my test scores, and with my understanding of schematics and advanced engineering.”

“Rig. That. Is. *Awesome*.”

“I’m not promising anything,” he said. “But, well, maybe if I bring them the right questions, I can get them to show me how to fix certain pieces of M-Bot. I’ll have to do it without making them suspicious. Regardless, we’ll still need spare parts. At least one full-size booster.”

“I’ll find us one, somehow.”

“Just don’t tell me where you get it,” he noted. “Maybe, when this whole thing blows up in our faces, I can claim I didn’t know about any possible thefts you might be up to.”

“A small decal on that power matrix reads ‘property of the Weight family,’ ” M-Bot said helpfully. “It looks to have been ripped, quite crudely, from a small chassis. Blue finish, judging by the scratched-off paint on the corner.”

Rig sighed. “Jorgen’s car? Really?”

I plastered on a smile.

“The internship will take a chunk of each day,” he said, rubbing his chin. “But I should be able to dedicate the rest to this, if I need to. I’ll have to tell my parents something.”

“Tell them the internship is super demanding,” I suggested. “And that it will take the majority of your time.”

“But,” M-Bot said, “that’s not true, is it?”

“Nah,” I said. “But who cares?”

“I care,” the machine said. “Why would you say something that isn’t true?”

“You can simulate emotions,” I said, “but not lies?”

“I appear . . . to be missing some code,” M-Bot said. “Curious. Oh, what an interesting fungus!”

I frowned, then glanced to the side, to where Doomslug had crawled up on a rock.

“Scud,” Rig said. “There’s some weird stuff up here close to the surface.” He shivered. “Can you . . . do something about that thing?”

“That *thing* is named Doomslug,” I said, “and she’s my mascot. Don’t hurt her while I’m away.” I walked over, grabbing my pack. “I need to get to class. You going to head below?”

“Nah,” Rig said. “I suspected I might not be back for a while, so I left a note for my parents, saying I was going to an employment meeting. They’ll just assume I got up before them. I can head down later—I want to have a look at his wiring first.”

“Great,” I said. “If you’re still here when I get back from class each day, I’ll join you in the repairs. If not, leave me notes telling me what I can do to help.” I hesitated. “Remember, I’m kind of a dunderhead at this. So you might want to give me the easy—but annoying—tasks.”

Rig smiled once more, settling down on a rock, looking at M-Bot. There was a light in his eyes, one I remembered from back when we started planning to become pilots. In that moment, seeing Rig like that again, I had my first real impression that this might work. Somehow, this plan *might just work*.

“Wait,” M-Bot said. “You’re leaving me with him?”

“I’ll be back tonight,” I promised.

“I see. Could you come to the cockpit so we can speak in private?”

I looked at the ship, frowning.

“I don’t want to explain in public why I like you better than the engineer,” M-Bot added. “If he heard me go on—at length—regarding his irresolvable flaws, he might feel belittled or despondent.”

“Well, *that* part is going to be lovely,” Rig said, rolling his eyes. “Maybe we can find a way to shut off the personality.”

I pulled myself up into the cockpit. The canopy moved down and sealed with a *whoosh*. “It’s all right,” I said to M-Bot. “Rig is good people. He’ll take care of you.”

“I am, of course, simply emulating the way humans play irrational favorites over one another. But could you not go?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve got to go learn to fight the Krell.” I frowned at the tone in the robot’s voice. “What’s wrong? I told you, Rig is a good—”

“I am willing to accept that he is until evidence proves otherwise. This is a problem: I appear to have lost my master.”

“I can be your new master.”

“I cannot change masters without proper authentication codes,” he said. “Which I just realized I do not remember. The problem, however, is larger than this mere fact. I do not remember my mission. I do not know where I came from. I do not know my purpose. If I were human, I would be . . . scared.”

How did I respond to *that*? A frightened starship?

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’ll give you a new purpose—destroying the Krell. You’re a *fighter*. M-Bot. I’m sure that name stands for something exciting. Murderbot . . . mayhembot. *Massacrebot*. That’s it, I’m sure. You’re a frightening, all-powerful death ship designed to fry the Krell and save humanity.”

“I do not feel very frightening,” he said. “I do not feel like a death ship.”

“We’ll deal with that,” I promised. “Trust me.”

“And can I trust that those words are not . . . a falsehood? Like the one to tell the engineer’s parents?”

Well. *That* came back to bite me faster than I’d expected.

“I must ask you,” M-Bot said more softly, “not to tell any others about me. I assumed you’d understood this earlier, when I explained my orders. I am supposed to ‘lie low,’ which is a colloquialism for remaining inconspicuous. You should not have told the engineer.”

“And how would we repair you, otherwise?”

“I do not know. Spensa, I am an artificial intelligence—a computer. I *must* obey my orders. Please. You *can’t* turn me over to your DDF. You must not even speak of me to anyone else.”

Well, that was going to present a problem. I wanted to get this thing flying, and once I did, that would mean flying it to help in the fight against the Krell. And if we couldn’t fix it . . . well, I’d need to turn it over. Regardless of what I thought of Ironsides, I couldn’t just sit on this ship forever. Not if it could mean the difference between the survival and extinction of humanity.

I had opened my mouth to argue with M-Bot further when a set of lights started flashing on the dashboard.

“Multiple atmospheric incursions have been detected by my short-range sensors,” M-Bot said. “Debris has begun falling toward the planet, with forty-three ships following.”

“Forty-three?” I said, glancing at his sensor readout. Short range for him was apparently still pretty long, by our standards. “Wow. You can spot them, even in a debris fall?”

“Easily.”

Proof already that the DDF could use this technology. Our scanners weren’t as accurate as that. That knowledge immediately made me uncomfortable.

Still, forty-three Krell? The maximum they ever fielded was a hundred ships, so this was an impressive force. I hit the button to open the canopy, then hauled myself out and hopped off onto a rock.

“Krell,” I said to Rig. “A big flight.”

“Are we in danger here?”

“No, they’re coming from the other direction. But the cadets have been training long enough now that Ironsides has started sending them up for real, as support units, during combat. Firestorm Flight went two days ago.”

“So . . .”

“So I’d better get going. Just in case.”

## 19

I started running.

A sense of anxiety built in me as I heard the distant sound of debris hitting. I somehow knew that Ironsides would send my flight up for this attack. She liked testing cadets in real combat experience, and we were far enough in our training that Cobb had warned we'd soon be sent into some real battles.

It was our turn. The time had come. So I forced myself into a jog—then a dash—across the dusty ground.

Sweat pouring down the sides of my face, I felt a horrible inevitability as I approached the base, where warning klaxons blared. Not fear, really, but *dread*. What if I was too late? What if the others went into battle without me?

I entered the base, then rounded the outside wall toward our launchpad. A single ship sat there, alone. I had been right.

I reached my ship in a sweaty mess, pushing my own ladder into place as several members of the ground crew noticed me and started yelling.

One got there in time to stabilize my ladder. “Where have you been, cadet!” she shouted at me. “The rest of your flight went up twenty minutes ago!”

I shook my head, sliding into the cockpit, too exhausted to speak.

“No pressure suit?” the ground crewer said.

“No time.”

“All right. Don’t make any sharp ascents then. You have clearance to go. Call in to your flightleader, then move.”

I nodded, then pulled on my helmet. This one—like the one in the training room—had the strange lumps inside, to measure whatever it was

they wanted to measure about me. I flipped on the flight radio band as the canopy lowered.

“—don’t let your nerves get the best of you,” Jerkface was saying over the radio. “Stay focused, watch your wingmate. You heard Cobb. We don’t have to fire. Just focus on keeping yourselves from being turned to slag.”

“What?” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Spin?” Jerkface asked. “Where have you been?”

“In my cave! Where else would I be?” I engaged my acclivity ring and launched my ship upward. G-forces hit me, and my stomach felt like it was trying to escape through my toes. I slowed the ascent. “Repeat that part to me. You’re going into battle? You’re not staying at the edge of combat?”

“The admiral finally wants to let us fight!” Bim said, eager.

“Contain yourself, Bim,” Jerkface said. “Spin, we’re at 11.3-302.7-21000. Get here as fast as you can. Ironsides has ordered us into a small firefight alongside a flight of full pilots. We’re there to confuse the enemy and hopefully split their attention.”

*In other words, we’re being sent in as targets.* I thought, wiping my hand on my jumpsuit, my heartbeat thrumming, sweat making my hair stick to my face. *Or they are. Without me.*

Not for long.

I slammed the throttle forward, going into overburn. The Grav-Caps protected me for three seconds, and then I slammed back in my seat. I could take g-forces like these though, pushing me straight backward. It wasn’t pleasant, but I didn’t risk blacking out. I just had to get to speed, then carefully climb—using the acclivity ring.

I quickly reached Mag-10—which was the upper speed threshold for a Poco, at least safely. Even this was stretching the limits. The atmospheric scoops—which pushed air away around the ship in a bubble, preventing me from ripping off my own wings during tight maneuvers—were overwhelmed, and my ship rattled from the motion. The friction of air resistance made my normally invisible shield start to glow.

I climbed upward as well—but carefully, slower, as the g-forces in that direction threatened to knock me out. Going up forced my blood down into my feet. I did the stomach-clenching exercises we’d been taught in centrifuge training, but still, darkness started to creep around the outsides of my vision.

I held on, pressed down at six times my normal weight. Though the flight would only take a short while, I had to listen to my friends in battle all the way.

“Careful, Hurl. Not too eager.”

“One’s on me! I’ve got one on me!”

“Dodge, FM!”

“Dodging! Dodging! Scud, who was *that*?”

“Nightstorm Six. That’s my brother, guys! Callsign: Vent. FM, you owe me some fries or something.”

“To your right! Arturo, look up!”

“Looking! Stars, what a mess.”

Finally my dash beeped, indicating I was approaching my desired coordinates. I let off on the altitude lever, then performed a rapid deceleration. In a Poco with atmospheric scoops, that meant *spinning* my ship in the air—the GravCaps kicking in—then firing my booster backward to slow me down.

I came out of it after slowing to Mag-1, standard dogfighting speed. I spun my Poco around, facing toward the battlefield, where distant lights flashed in the dark morning sky. Debris fell as red streaks.

“I’m here,” I said to the others.

“Get in and help Morningtide!” Jorgen shouted at me. “Can you spot her?”

“Looking!” I said, frantic, scanning my proximity sensor screen. *There*. I hit overburn, accelerating her direction.

“Guys,” I said, glancing at the scanner. “Morningtide has picked up a tail!”

“I see it,” Jerkface said. “Morningtide, you read?”

“Trying. Trying dodge.”

My ship screamed toward the battlefield. I could now see the individual fighters—a swirling mess mixed with destructor bolts and the occasional light-lance. Morningtide’s Poco pulled upward into a loop—trailed by *three* Krell ships.

*Almost there. Almost there!*

The Krell destructors flared. Hit. Hit again. And then . . .

A burst of light. A spray of sparks.

And Morningtide died in a massive explosion. She didn’t have a chance to eject.

Kimmalyn screamed—a high-pitched, panicked, *pained* sound.

“No!” Jerkface said. “No, no, *no!*”

I arrived, flying at Mag-3—too fast for normal dogfighting maneuvers—but still managed to spear one of the Krell ships with my light-lance. But it was too late.

The fiery sparks that had been Morningtide went out as they fell.

I spun and reversed my thrust, letting go of the light-lance and flinging the Krell ship to the side. Another of our fighters came in after it, shooting and managing to blast it down.

I fell in beside Jerkface, silently smothering my own screams. He’d lost his wingmate. Where was Arturo?

I couldn’t make out anything tactical in the fray. My flight zipped in all directions, drawing fire—yes—but also adding to the confusion. A few larger classes of DDF fighters wound through it all, mixing with some dozen Krell ships, each trailing wires in that same unfinished way.

I was crying. But I set my jaw and kept on Jorgen’s wing. He expertly speared a Krell ship with his light-lance, and it tried to break away, so I speared it as well.

“That debris, Jorgen,” I said. “Coming down at your two, falling slowly.”

“Right.” We both hit our throttles, as Cobb had taught us, and pulled the enemy ship toward the debris. At the last minute, we cut our lines and split to the sides, slamming the Krell ship into the debris in a fiery explosion.

“What are you two doing?” Cobb said over the line. “You were ordered into *defensive postures*.”

“Cobb!” I said. “Morningtide—”

“Keep your head, girl!” he shouted. “Grieve when the debris rests. Right now, obey orders. *Defensive. Postures.*”

I gritted my teeth, but didn’t argue, following Jorgen as he wound through the smoke trails left by falling chunks of debris. That looked to be Arturo and Nedd to my right, leapfrogging each other with quick accelerations and decelerations, to keep the enemy from focusing on either one of them. That kind of technique could confuse the Krell, much like overwhelming them with targets.

*Morningtide . . .*

“Quirk?” Jorgen said. “What are you doing?”

I realized I could still hear Kimmalyn’s soft whine of pain over the radio. I searched the scanner, then spotted a single Poco—without a wingmate—



hovering near the perimeter of the fight.

“Quirk, move!” Jorgen said. “You’re a clear target. Get in here.”

“I . . .,” Kimmalyn said. “I was trying to line up a shot. I was going to save her . . .”

“*Join the fight!*” Jorgen shouted. “Cadet, hit your throttle and get in here!”

“I’ll cover her,” I said, moving to break off as we zoomed past two Krell coming the other way. So many sparks and destructor shots lit the sky, I almost felt I was down in Igneous, swallowed up by a forge.

“No,” Jorgen said to me. “You see Bim? At your eight? Cover him. I’ll deal with Kimmalyn.”

“Understood.” I zipped down and to my left, the GravCaps covering the g-forces of the sharp turn. As I moved, however, a spot on my dash lit up: a bright violet warning light near my proximity sensors.

I’d picked up a tail.

Though we’d barely touched on dogfighting, Cobb’s training snapped into my mind. *Trust the scanner. Don’t waste time trying to get a visual. Keep your focus on flying.*

“Spin!” FM said. “You’ve got a tail!”

I was already pulling my ship into an evasive loop, counting on the GravCaps to handle the g-force. Something *clicked* immediately in my head. The training, the way my face grew cold, the way my mind snapped into focus despite the fatigue, the stress, and the grief. It was almost like it didn’t matter if a Krell was following me. In that moment, it was just me and the ship. Extensions of one another.

I pulled out of my loop into a straight dive, then cut to the side and launched a perfect light-lance hook into a slowly falling chunk of debris. I didn’t go quite fast enough, and when my GravCaps cut, the g-forces rammed me down in my seat. I saw black at the corners of my vision, but held on.

I spun around sharply and buzzed another chunk of debris—trailing its smoke in my wake—then zoomed right between two Krell ships coming the other direction. My tail lost me in the turn—and I caught a flashing explosion behind me as one of the full pilots picked it off while it was trying to catch up to me.

“Good maneuver, Spin,” Cobb said softly in my ear. “Excellent maneuver, actually. But don’t get too flashy. Remember the simulation.

Flashy moves can still get you killed.”

I nodded, though he couldn’t see.

“Bim is at your ten now, up about one-fifty. Get on him. That boy is too eager.”

As if on cue, Bim’s voice entered the flight line. “Guys? Do you see that? Up in front of me?”

There was a larger firefight happening in the distance; we’d been ordered to join the smaller of the two skirmishes. I could make out the falling sparks and missed destructor shots of that larger battle, but I didn’t think that was what Bim was indicating.

As I fell in at his side, I spotted it: a Krell ship, but a different model from the curved fighters. This one was bulbous, like a bulging fruit with wings at the top. Or . . . no, that was a ship flying with something huge attached to the bottom.

*A bomber.* I realized, remembering my studies. *One carrying a lifebuster.*

“Lifebuster,” Jorgen said. “Cobb, we’ve confirmed sighting of a lifebuster bomb.”

“The other flight radio bands are talking about it too,” Cobb said. “Steady, cadet. The admiral is already dealing with that bomber.”

“I can hit it, Cobb,” Bim said. “I can bring it down.”

I expected Cobb to dismiss that idea immediately, but he didn’t. “Let me call for orders and tell them you have a visual.”

Bim took that as confirmation. “You with me, Spin?”

“Every step,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, cadet,” Cobb said. “There’s something odd about these descriptions. Can you confirm? That bomb sounds larger than usual.”

Bim wasn’t listening. I watched out my cockpit window as he dove toward the solitary bomber, which had—following usual Krell protocol—slipped down to low altitude to try flying in underneath the AA guns.

“Something’s wrong,” Cobb said.

A group of shadows broke off the sides of the bomb—smaller Krell ships, almost invisible in the darkness. Four of them.

They lit up the air with red destructor blasts. One grazed my canopy, causing my shield to crackle with light. My nerves jolted, and I spun my ship—by instinct—to the side.

“Cobb,” I said. “Four escort ships just broke off the bomber!”

The ships buzzed us. I dodged, barely, my hands sweaty on my controls. “They’re faster than regular Krell!”

“This is something new,” Cobb said. “Fall back, you two.”

“I can hit it, Cobb!” Bim said. The light of his destructor glowed at the front of his ship as he powered up a long-range shot.

The four guardian ships swarmed toward us, firing again.

“Bim!” I screamed.

I was pretty sure I saw him look toward me—light reflecting on his helmet visor—as the blasts hit his ship, overwhelming his shield with concentrated fire.

Bim’s ship exploded into several large chunks, one of which slammed into my ship. I was flung to the side as my Poco went into a spin. Quirk screamed my name as the world rocked. The lights on my dash went insane, the “shield down” warning blaring.

G-forces hit as the GravCaps were overwhelmed. Nausea flooded me, and everything became a blur. But my training still kicked in. Somehow—pulling hard on the control sphere—I managed to hit the dive controls, which pivoted my acclivity ring on its front hinge, like a hatch swinging open. That angled it toward the nose of my ship, and the maneuver pulled me out of the fall. The world righted itself, and I hung there in a hover, my nose pointed straight at the ground.

Lights flashed on my dash. Below, I watched as Bim’s remains hit the surface in a ripple of soft explosions.

He’d never . . . he’d never even picked a callsign.

“The enemy is disengaging!” Nedd said. “Looks like they’ve had enough!”

I listened, numb, to other reports. A strike team of full pilots went after the bomber, and rather than risk losing the weapon, the Krell pulled into a full retreat.

The bomber escaped, as did enough ships to keep the admiral from giving chase.

I just hung there, blue glow of the acclivity ring a cold, lifeless light in front of me.

“Spin?” Jorgen said. “Report in? Are you all right?”

“No,” I whispered, but finally reset my acclivity ring, rotating my ship to the standard axis. I channeled power to the shield igniter, waited until the

light powered up, then grabbed the handle and slammed it backward. Another shield crackled to life around my Poco, then turned invisible.

I climbed up into line with the others.

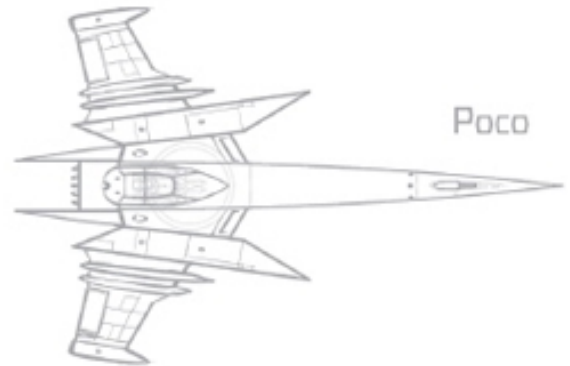
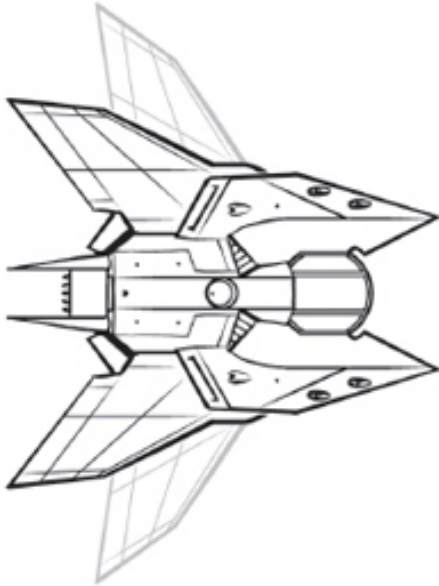
“Vocal confirmation of status,” Jorgen ordered.

We responded, and everyone else was still there. But when we flew back to base, our formation had two stark holes in it. Bim and Morningtide were gone.

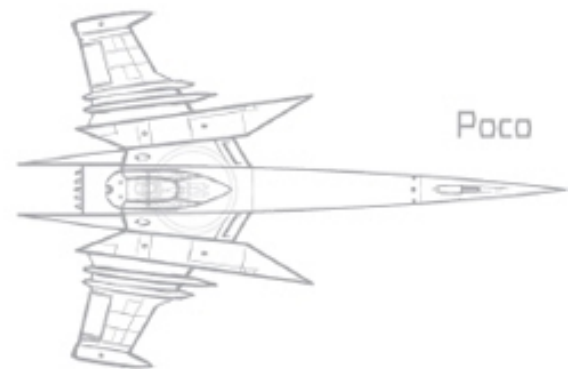
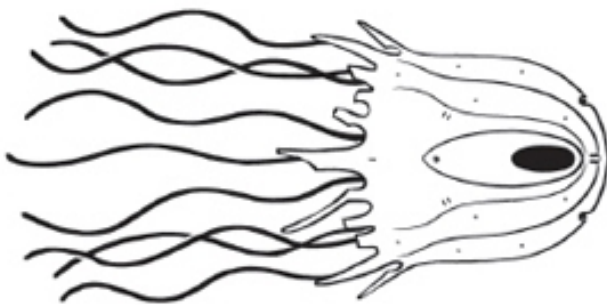
Skyward Flight had been reduced from nine to seven.

## Other Ship Designs

◦ ≡ ≡ ≡ ▷ M-Bot ◁ ≡ ≡ ≡ ◦



◦ ≡ ≡ ≡ ▷ Krell Interceptor ◁ ≡ ≡ ≡ ◦





## PART THREE

## INTERLUDE

Admiral Judy “Ironsides” Ivans always made a point of reading the casualty reports.

She got people killed. Every battle, she made decisions—some of them mistakes—that ended lives. Perhaps there was an astral balance chart somewhere out there, kept in the stars by the ancient Saints, which weighed the Defiant lives she lost against the ones she saved.

If so, that scale had been greatly tipped by today’s battle. Two cadets were dead after barely a month of training in the cockpit. She read their names, tried to commit them to memory—though she knew she’d fail. There had just been so many.

She reverently set the list of names and short biographies on top of her desk. Two other pilots had died as well, and composing letters to their families would take a bite out of her evening, but she’d do it. To those families, the loss would take a bite out of their *lives*.

She was halfway done—writing by hand, instead of using a typewriter—when Cobb came to yell at her at last. She saw him reflected in the brass of the polished spyglass she kept on her desk. A relic from a much, much earlier time. He stopped in the doorway, and didn’t lay into her immediately, but let her finish her current letter. She signed it at the bottom, making a flourish with the fountain pen—a gesture that somehow seemed both necessary and ostentatious in such a letter.

“Are you happy, Judy?” he finally asked. “Now that you’ve gotten two of them killed, are you *scudding* happy?”

“I haven’t been happy in years, Cobb.” She turned her chair, leaning back and meeting his glare. She’d been anticipating, perhaps even relishing, his



inevitable arrival. It was good she still had someone to defy her. Most everyone else who had done that was dead now.

He limped into the small room, which was piled high with papers, keepsakes, books—an embarrassingly messy office. Yet it was the only place she felt comfortable.

“You can’t keep doing this,” Cobb said. “First you lower the age of testing, now you send them into battle before they really know how to fly? You can’t keep firing on full auto while you simultaneously steal ammunition from the stores. Eventually you’re *going to run out of bullets*.”

“You’d rather I let Alta fall?”

He looked to the side, toward an old map she still kept on the wall. The glass was dusty with age and the paper inside had started to curl. It was a plan for Alta, from their development session almost a decade ago. They’d imagined a city with massive neighborhoods and large farms.

A fantasy. Reclaiming a dead world was harder work than they’d anticipated.

She pushed herself to her feet, the old captain’s chair creaking. “I *will* spend their lives, Cobb. I’ll eagerly put everyone in the DDF in danger, if it means protecting Alta.”

“At some point it stops being worth the losses, Judy.”

“Yes, and I happen to know when that point is.” She stepped up to him, holding his gaze. “It’s when the *very last Defiant* heaves their *very last breath*. Until then, we hold this base.”

If they lost Alta, then Igneous could be bombed from above—destroying the apparatus and humankind’s ability to build ships. If that happened, the Defiants would return to living in broken clans, like rats to be hunted.

They either stood their ground, or they gave up on ever becoming a true civilization again.

Finally, Cobb relented and turned to leave. From him, lack of complaint was agreement.

“I noticed,” Judy said, “that your little coward didn’t arrive at the battle until most of the fighting had already happened.”

He spun on her, practically snarling. “She lives in an unimproved cave, Judy. *Alone*. You realize that, don’t you? One of your pilots lives in a makeshift camp beyond the city limits because *you* refuse to give her a bunk.”

It was satisfying to see that anger in him. She worried he would burn out one of these days. He never *had* been the same, since the Battle of Alta.

“Do you know what the readouts are saying?” Judy asked. “The scans of her brain? Some of our doctors are certain they’ve figured out how to spot it now. I suppose I should thank you for that. Getting a chance to study Chaser’s daughter in flight might finally give me proof. She has the defect.”

That gave him pause. “We barely understand what it means,” he finally said. “And your doctors are biased. A few confusing events and some stories of the past aren’t enough to judge a girl’s entire life, particularly a girl so talented.”

“That’s the problem,” Judy said. She was surprised to hear Cobb argue, honestly. Many politicians denied the defect’s existence, but Cobb? He’d seen its effects personally. “As useful as this data is, I can’t risk letting her have a commission in the DDF. She would be nothing but a distraction and a blow to morale.”

“A distraction to *you*. maybe. A blow to *your* morale. The way you’re acting is a disgrace to the DDF.”

“For all intents and purposes, I *am* the DDF. Stars help us. There’s nobody else left.”

He glared at her. “I’m going to give the girl a personal radio. I won’t have one of my cadets outside my reach. Unless you would reconsider giving her a bunk.”

“If I make it too easy on her, she might decide to stay instead of doing the sensible thing and moving on.”

Cobb limped toward the door—he refused to use a cane, even after all these years—but paused again there, hand on the frame. “Do you ever wish one of the others had survived?” he asked. “Sousa. Nightingale. Strife. Admiral Heimline.”

“Anyone but me?” Judy asked.

“Basically.”

“I’m not sure I’d wish this command on them,” she said. “Not even the ones I hated.”

Cobb grunted, then disappeared into the hallway.

## 20

The day after Morningtide and Bim died, I arrived late for Cobb's class. It was only by about five minutes, but it was still my first time being late.

Everything just felt so *wrong*.

I vaguely remembered tromping back to my cave the day before, ignoring M-Bot—Rig had already gone home—and curling up in my cockpit bed. Then I'd just lain there. Not sleeping, but wishing that I would. Thinking, but wishing that I would stop. Not crying . . . but somehow wishing that I could.

Today, nobody called me on my tardiness. Cobb wasn't there yet, though almost all of the remaining cadets had assembled. Everyone but Kimmalyn, which worried me. Was she okay?

My boots squeaked on the floor as I walked over and sat. I didn't want to look at the conspicuously empty seats, but that made me feel like a coward, so I forced myself to stare at Morningtide's spot. Just two days ago I'd been standing there, helping her understand . . .

She'd almost never said anything, but somehow the room felt so much quieter without her.

"Hey, Spin," Nedd finally said. "You're always talking about 'honor' and the 'glory of dying like warriors' and crap like that."

"Yeah? So?"

"So . . .," Nedd said. "Maybe we could use a little of that crap right now."

Nedd slumped in place, barely fitting into his mockpit. He was the tallest one in the room—and burly too. I'd always thought of him simply as the larger of Jerkface's two cronies, but there was more to him. A thoughtfulness.

"Well?" he asked.

“I . . .,” I said, struggling to find words. “That all feels stupid now.”

I couldn’t rattle off some line about vengeance. Not today. Doing so would feel like playing a part in one of Gran-Gran’s stories—while the loss felt so very real. But . . . did that make my conviction all just bravado? Was I a coward hiding behind aggressive platitudes?

A real warrior would shrug it off. Did I really think these were the last friends I’d lose?

FM climbed out of her seat and walked over to me. She squeezed me on the shoulder, a strikingly familiar gesture from a girl I knew only passingly well, despite our time in the same flight. What was her story? I’d never found a way to ask.

I glanced toward Bim’s place, thinking of the incredibly awkward—yet wonderful—way he’d tried to flirt with me.

“Do you know where Kimmalyn is?” I asked FM.

“She got up and ate with us,” the tall girl whispered, “but she stopped at the restroom on the way to class. Maybe someone should go check on her.”

Before I could get up, Jerkface was on his feet, clearing his throat. He looked around at the other five of us. Me and FM. Hurl, slumped in her seat. She didn’t seem to be treating this like a game any longer. Arturo, who sat with hands clasped, tapping his index fingers together at a rapid pace, like some kind of nervous tic. Nedd sitting with his feet up and resting on the incalculably valuable hologram projector at the front of his mockpit. Remarkably, his bootlaces were untied.

“I suppose,” Jerkface said, “that I should say something.”

“Of course,” FM whispered, rolling her eyes, though she returned to her own place.

Jerkface began speaking in a stiff voice. “The DDF protocol handbook explains that to die in the cockpit—fighting to protect our homeland—is the bravest and greatest gift a person can give. Our friends, though taken too early, were models of Defiant ideals.”

*He’s reading. I realized. From notes written . . . on his hand?*

“We will remember them as soldiers,” Jerkface continued, now holding his hand up before him. “If you need counseling at this loss—or for any reason—as your flightleader, I am here. Please come to me, so I can make you feel better. I will gladly bear the burden of your grief so that you can focus on your flight training. Thank you.”

He sat down. And, well, that was probably the dumbest speech I'd ever heard. More about him than about those empty seats. But . . . I supposed he had tried?

Cobb finally limped through the door, holding a fistful of papers and muttering something to himself. "Flight positions!" he snapped. "We're going to cover tandem maneuvering today—again. The way you guard each other is so sloppy, I'd expect to see you on a plate of mess hall food."

We just kind of stared at him.

"Move!" he barked.

Everyone started strapping in.

I—instead—stood up. "Is that it?" I demanded. "Aren't you going to say anything about them? About Bim, or Morningtide, or what the admiral did to—"

"The admiral," Cobb said, "did nothing to you. The *Krell* killed your friends."

"That's ratcrap," I blurted. "If you toss a kid into a lion's den, can you really blame the lion?"

He met my eyes, but I wasn't going to back down this time. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but at least this emotion—feeling furious at him, at the admiral, at the DDF—was better than emptiness.

We glared at each other until the door squeaked and opened, and Kimmalyn stepped in. Though her long black hair was combed—as usual—into perfect curls, her eyes were puffy and red. Cobb glanced at her and his eyes widened, as if he was surprised to see her.

*He thought she'd given up.* I realized.

Instead, puffy eyes and all, Kimmalyn raised her chin.

Cobb nodded toward her seat, and she strode over—a model of Defiant poise—and sat down. In that moment, she seemed more like a warrior than I'd ever been.

I set my jaw, then took my seat and strapped in. Shoving Cobb around wasn't going to relieve my anger at the admiral. I needed a control sphere in my hand and a destructor trigger under my finger. That was probably why Cobb wanted to work us hard today—to make us sweat, maybe make us forget for a little while. And . . . yeah. Yeah, I was on board for that.

Cobb, however, didn't turn on our projectors. Instead he slowly took a folding chair, then limped to the center of the room and unfolded it. He sat

down, clasping his hands before him. I had to lean out the side of my rig to see him, as did most of the others.

He looked old. Older than he deserved to.

“I know how it feels,” he said. “Like there’s been a hole carved right out of you. A chunk of flesh that’s just not going to grow back. You can function, you can fly, but you’re going to leave a blood trail for a while.

“I should say something here, about loss. Something wise. Old Mara, who taught me to fly, would have. She’s dead now.” Cobb shook his head. “Sometimes I don’t feel like a teacher. I feel like a munitions man, reloading artillery. I stuff you into the chamber, fire you into the sky, then grab another shell . . .”

Hearing him talk that way was discomfoting, unnatural. Like a parent suddenly admitting they didn’t know what love felt like. We’d all heard stories about flight instructors. Old, grizzled, quick to bite your head off, but stuffed full of wisdom.

In that moment though, I saw the man, not the instructor. That man was afraid and distraught—and as pained to lose students as we were to lose friends. He wasn’t some grizzled veteran with all the answers. He was a man who had, almost by coincidence, survived long enough to be made into a teacher. He had to teach us both the things he knew *and* the things he clearly hadn’t yet figured out himself.

“Claim the stars,” I said.

Cobb looked up at me.

“When I was a girl,” I said, “I wanted to become a pilot so I would be celebrated. And my father told me to set my sights higher. He told me to ‘claim the stars.’ ”

I looked upward, and tried to imagine those twinkling lights. Past the roof, up through the sky, piercing the rubble belt. Where the Saints welcomed the souls of the fallen when they died.

“It hurts,” I said. “More than I thought it would. I knew so little about Bim—only that he liked to smile. Morningtide, she could barely understand us. But she refused to give up.”

For a moment, I thought I could imagine myself soaring upward among those lights. Like Gran-Gran had taught me. I felt everything falling beneath me, becoming distant. All I could see were those points of light streaking around on all sides.

“They’re up in the sky now,” I said softly. “Forever among the stars. I’m going to join them.” I snapped out of the trance, and was suddenly back in the room with the others. “I’m going to strap in, and I’m going to *fight*. That way when I die, at least I’ll die in a cockpit. Reaching for heaven.”

The others stilled, ushering in an uncertain silence, like the moment between two meteor impacts. Nedd had sat up in his seat, no longer lounging, and he gave me an enthusiastic thumbs-up and a nod. Across from me, I found Jerkface staring at me, an inscrutable frown on his face.

“All right,” Cobb said, standing up. “Let’s stop wasting time. Helmets on.”

I grabbed my helmet and pulled it on, ignoring Jerkface’s stare. I immediately jumped, however, and pulled the helmet off.

“What?” Cobb said, limping over to me.

“The diodes inside are warm,” I said, feeling them. “What does it mean?”

“Nothing,” Cobb said. “. . . Probably.”

“That doesn’t reassure me, Cobb. What is going on?”

He lowered his voice. “Some medical types who think they’re smart believe they can tell from a bunch of readouts if you’re . . . going to run away like your father.”

“My father didn’t—”

“Calm down. We prove them wrong about you with good flying. That’s your best tool. Can you wear that?” He nodded to the helmet.

“Yeah. They aren’t painfully hot; I was just surprised.”

“Put it on then, and let’s get to work.”

## 21

Cobb kept his promise—he worked us *hard* that day.

We practiced coordinated banking, formations, and wingmate guarding exercises. We worked until my fingers felt stiff as gears, my arms ached like I'd been lifting weights, and my brain basically turned to mush. He even worked us through lunch, forcing an aide to bring everyone else sandwiches. I ate rat jerky and mushrooms like always.

The diodes in my helmet cooled down as I worked. The admiral thought she could tell from some *readouts* if I would be a coward? What kind of insanity was that?

There was no time to worry about it though. Cobb ran us through debris dodging, light-lance turns, and shield reignition drills. It was exhausting in a good way, and the only time I thought of Bim was when I realized that nobody was complaining that—yet again—we weren't being allowed to use our weapons.

When Cobb at long last let us go, I felt as if I could have curled up right there and dozed off.

"Hey, Arturo," Nedd said as he stood and stretched, "these projectors are pretty good. You think they could simulate a world where you're not a scudding terrible pilot?"

"All we need for that," Arturo said, "is an Off button for your radio. I'm certain we'd all improve by huge leaps if we didn't have to listen to your incessant jabbering. Besides, as I recall, *you* were the one who ran into *me* earlier."

"You were in my way!"

"Boys, boys," Hurl said, sauntering past. "Can't we make peace? Find common ground and agree that you're *both* terrible pilots?"



“Ha!” Arturo said. “You just watch—I’ll make you eat those words someday, Hurl.”

“I’m hungry enough that I’d eat them now,” she said, “if they had a decent sauce on them. The mess hall better not be closed. Quirk, can I have your dessert?”

“What?” the girl said, looking up from her harness—which she’d been clipping together and folding neatly in her seat, like she always did when getting out of her mockpit.

“You’re nice and stuff,” Hurl said. “I figure you’ll give in if I push hard enough. So, can I eat your dessert?”

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyyn said. “But touch my pie, and I’ll rip your fingers off.” She blushed when she said it, and lifted her hand in front of her mouth.

“She’ll do it, Hurl,” I joked. “It’s always the nice ones you have to worry about.”

“Yeah,” Hurl said. “Ain’t that the . . .” She trailed off as she realized I was the one who’d spoken. Then she turned and continued out the door.

I knew that look in her eyes. Ever since Jorgen outed me as Chaser’s daughter, things hadn’t been the same between Hurl and me.

The others piled out of the chamber. I sighed, gathering my pack, preparing for an exhausted hike back to my cavern. As I hefted it over my shoulder, I realized that FM hadn’t left. She was standing by the wall, watching me. She was so tall and beautiful. As cadets, we kept DDF pilot dress standards. For daily work, we could choose jumpsuits or standard DDF uniforms if we wanted. We just had to be ready to change into flight suits if a call came up.

Most of us simply wore the jumpsuits, which were the most comfortable. Not FM. Alongside her polished boots, she often wore a tailored uniform with a jacket that somehow looked more stylish on her than others. She was so perfect, she almost seemed more like a statue than a person.

“Thank you,” she said to me, “for what you said earlier. About Bim, Morningtide, and the stars.”

“You didn’t find it ‘overly aggressive’?” I asked. FM was always complaining that the rest of us were too aggressive, which didn’t make sense to me. Wasn’t aggression the point of war?

“Well, most of what you say *is* utter nonsense,” FM said. “Windy bravado made as an excuse to tout jingoistic mantras instilled in you by a

lifetime of Defiant indoctrination. But what you said earlier, that was from the heart. I . . . I needed to hear it. Thank you.”

“You’re a weird girl, FM,” I said. I had no idea what most of what she’d said had meant.

At his desk, Cobb snorted and glanced at me from behind his paperwork. *You, of all people, are calling someone weird?* his glance seemed to ask.

I walked with FM out into an empty hallway; the other cadet flights had finished classes hours ago.

“I want to make it clear,” FM said as we walked together, “that I don’t blame you for your attitudes. You’re a product of enormous societal pressure, forcing young people into increasingly aggressive postures. I’m sure on the inside you’re sweet.”

“I’m actually not,” I said, grinning. “But I’m okay if people underestimate me. Perhaps the Krell will do the same, so I can savor the surprise in their eyes as I rip *those very eyes* from their skulls.”

FM looked at me aghast.

“If, that is, they have eyes under that armor. Or skulls. Well—whatever they have, I’ll rip it out.” I glanced at her, then grinned more broadly. “I’m joking, FM. Kind of. I say things like that because they’re fun. Like the old stories, you know?”

“I haven’t read those old stories.”

“You’d probably hate them. Why do you always talk about the rest of us being too aggressive? Aren’t you Defiant?”

“I was raised Defiant,” she said. “But I choose, now, to be what people down below call a Disputer—I raise objections about the way the war is being run. I think we should throw off the oppressive mantle of military government.”

I stopped in place, shocked. I’d never heard words like that spoken before. “So . . . you’re a coward?”

FM blushed, standing up taller. “I’d have thought *you*. of all people, would be careful about throwing around that term.”

“Sorry,” I said, blushing in return. She was right. But still, I had trouble understanding what she was saying. I understood the words, but not the meaning. Throw off military government? Who would be in charge of the war then?

“I am still willing to fight,” FM said, her head high as we walked. “Just because I want change doesn’t mean I’ll let the Krell destroy us all. But do

you *realize* what it's doing to our society to train our children, practically from birth, to idealize and glorify fighting? To worship the First Citizens like saints? We should be teaching our children to be more caring, more inquisitive—not only to destroy, but to build.”

I shrugged. Those kinds of things seemed easy to say when you lived in the deep caverns, where a bomb wouldn't kill your family. Still, it was nice to get some answers about the woman—she was so poised, it was hard to think of her as a “girl” even though she was the same age as the rest of us.

If I walked too far with her toward the mess hall though, I might run into the MPs and get into trouble. They'd stopped escorting me out of class every day, but I didn't believe for a moment that meant I could go to dinner. So I bade FM farewell, and she jogged off to catch up with the others.

I started toward the exit, digging in my pack for some water—but remembered I'd left my last full canteen by my seat in the classroom. Great. Feeling my exhaustion from the training return, I trudged back to the classroom.

Cobb had activated the hologram in the center of the room, projecting a small version of a battlefield. In front of him, ships the size of ball bearings zipped and flew among debris trailing fire and smoke. Krell ships, flat and no larger than merit chits, fired tiny destructors.

*He's rewatching the fight from yesterday.* I realized. *The one where Bim and Morningtide died.* I'd had no idea the battles were recorded.

I picked out my ship as it zipped into the battle. I felt the overwhelming chaos again, the rush of finally being in a real fight. I could almost hear the explosions. Kimmalyn's worried voice. The sound of my own breathing, excited, sharp.

Anticipation, even a little fear, rose inside me while I watched—powerless. Morningtide died again.

My gut clenched. But I wouldn't let myself look away.

In the room, my ship zipped through the fray, picking up a tail. I dove around a falling piece of rubble—using my light-lance to pivot with exactness—then soared between two other Krell ships.

Cobb paused the simulation with a gesture. He stepped forward, focusing on my ship—frozen in the air amid a spectacular show of destructors, falling streaks of light, and exploding ships. Then he rewound the simulation and played it through again, watching my maneuver.

"I almost blacked out," I noted from the doorway. "I didn't have control of my speed, and didn't cut the turn before the GravCaps overloaded."

"It was still quite the maneuver," he said. "Particularly for a cadet. Remarkable, almost unbelievable."

"Jerkface is better than I am."

"Jorgen is an excellent technical pilot, but he doesn't feel it like you do. You remind me of your father." He seemed . . . grim as he said it.

I suddenly felt awkward, so I crossed to my simulator and grabbed my canteen. Cobb played out the rest of the battle, and I forced myself to watch as my ship and Bim's chased the Krell bomber. Cobb froze the simulation again as the four strange guard ships broke off the enemy bomber—the ones who would, momentarily, shoot down Bim.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Something new. They haven't altered their tactics in over a decade. What changed now?" He narrowed his eyes. "We survive by being able to anticipate the Krell. Anytime you can guess what your enemy is going to do, you have an advantage. No matter how dangerous they are, if you know their next move, you can counter it."

*Huh.* That struck me, and I found myself nodding.

Cobb shut down the hologram and hobbled back toward his desk. "Here," he said, sliding a box off the top and handing it to me. "I forgot to give this to you earlier."

A personal radio?

"Normally, we only give these to full pilots who get off-duty time down in Igneous. But since you live off base, I figured you should have one. Keep it on you at all times. You'll get a general warning call when the Krell attack."

I took the device, which was rectangular and boxy, maybe the size of a small one-handed training weight. My father had carried one of these.

Cobb waved to dismiss me, then settled down in his seat and started looking through his papers.

I lingered though, a question on my mind. "Cobb?"

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you fly with us? The other flight instructors go up with their cadets."

I braced myself for anger or reprimand. Cobb just patted his leg. "Old wounds, Spin. Old wounds." He'd been shot down, soon after the Battle of

Alta. His leg had clipped the side of the canopy as he'd ejected.

"You don't need your leg to fly."

"Some wounds," he said softly, "aren't as obvious as a twisted leg. You found it hard to get into the cockpit today, after watching your friends die? Try doing it after you shoot down one of your own."

I felt a sudden and striking coldness wash through me, like I'd ejected at high altitude. Was he saying . . .

Was he saying *he* was the one who had *shot down my father*?

Cobb looked up at me. "Who else do you think they'd order to bring him down, kid? I was his wingmate. I followed him when he ran."

"He didn't run."

"I was there. He ran, Spensa. He—"

"My father was *not a coward!*"

I met Cobb's gaze, and for the second time that day he looked away.

"What really happened up there, Cobb?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why do they think they can tell I'll do the same, just by monitoring my brain? What aren't you telling me?"

Though I'd never accepted the official story, part of me had always assumed that some kind of mistake had caused my father's reputation. That in the confusion, people had assumed he'd turned coward when he hadn't.

But I now had the chance to talk to someone who was there. Someone who . . . who had pulled the trigger . . .

"What happened?" I asked, stepping forward. I'd meant to say it forcefully, Defiantly—but it came out as a whispered plea. "Can you tell me? What you saw?"

"You've read the official report," Cobb said, still not meeting my eyes. "The Krell were coming in a huge wave, carrying a lifebuster. It was a larger force than we'd ever faced before, and their positioning strongly indicated they'd found Alta Base. We fought off one attack, but they regrouped. As they were preparing to come at us again, your father panicked. He screamed that the enemy force was too big, that we were all going to die. He—"

"Who did he say it to? The entire flight?"

Cobb paused. "Yes. All four of us who were left, anyway. Well, he screamed and screamed, then he broke off and began flying away. You have to understand how dangerous that was for us. We were literally fighting for

the survival of our species—if other ships started fleeing, it would have been chaos. We couldn't afford to—”

“You followed him,” I interrupted. “He took off and flew away, and you followed. Then you shot him down?”

“The order came almost immediately from our flightleader. Shoot him down, to make an example and prevent anyone else from fleeing. I was right on his tail, and he wouldn't respond to our pleas. So I hit my IMP and brought down his shield, then . . . then I shot. I'm a soldier. I obey orders.”

The pain in his voice was so real, so personal, it almost made me feel ashamed for pushing him. For the first time . . . my resolve shook. Could it be *true*?

“You swear to me?” I asked. “That's exactly how it happened?”

Cobb finally met my eyes. He held them this time, and didn't look away—but he also didn't answer my question. I saw him harden as he set his jaw. And in that moment, I knew that his nonanswer *was* an answer. He'd given me the official story.

And it was a lie.

“It's past time for you to be going, cadet,” Cobb said. “If you want a copy of the official record, I can get you one.”

“But it's a lie. Isn't it?” I looked to him again, and he gave the faintest, almost imperceptible *nod*.

My entire world lit up. I should have been angry. I should have been furious at Cobb for pulling the trigger. Instead, I was *elated*.

My father *hadn't* run. My father *wasn't* a coward.

“But why?” I asked. “What's to be gained by pretending one of your pilots fled?”

“Go,” Cobb said, pointing. “That's an order, cadet.”

“This is why Ironsides doesn't want me in the DDF,” I realized. “She knows I'll ask questions. Because . . . Scud, she was your flightleader, wasn't she? The one who gave the order to shoot my father down? The name was redacted in the reports, but she's the only one who fits . . .”

I looked back at Cobb, and his face was growing red with anger. Or maybe embarrassment. He'd just given me a secret, an important one, and . . . well, he looked like he was having second thoughts. I wasn't going to get any more out of him right now.

I grabbed my pack and hurried out. My heart was broken for the friends I'd lost, and now I'd have to deal with the fact that my instructor was also

my father's killer.

But for now . . . well, I felt like a soldier planting her flag at the top of a hard-fought hill. All these years I'd dreamed, and studied, and trusted that my father had actually been a hero.

And I'd been right.

## 22

“What reason,” Rig asked as we worked together, “could the DDF possibly have to *pretend* your father was a coward?”

“I can think of dozens of scenarios,” I said, lying underneath M-Bot beside him.

Five days had passed since the event. Since we’d lost Bim and Morningtide. Working with Rig off-hours, repairing the ship, had been a welcome solace from my own thoughts—even if it was taxing to get up early like I had today, work on the ship, then go to class and endure Cobb’s instructions all day.

Today, we were unhooking wires from M-Bot’s belly and replacing them with new ones. Some of the old ones seemed good, but Rig figured we should replace them all just in case, and I wasn’t going to argue with his expertise.

I plugged in another wire and threaded it according to the instructions Rig had drawn out earlier. My light-line glowed from within the ship, wound through the innards to give us light, itself like a glowing wire.

“There are literally hundreds of reasons the DDF would lie about my father,” I said as I worked. “Maybe my father was in conflict with Ironsides about leadership, and she decided to make him have an ‘accident.’ ”

“In the middle of the most important battle the DDF had ever flown?” Rig said. “That’s fanciful, even for you, Spin.”

“Fanciful?” I demanded. “Me? I’m a realist, Rig.”

“Realist. Like all the times you made me go pretend to slay stardragons with you as kids.”

“That was battle training.”



He grunted as he worked on a particularly stubborn wire, and Doomslug helpfully imitated him. She sat on the stone ground near my head. M-Bot was “running diagnostics”—whatever that meant. It mostly involved him saying things like “HMMMMM . . .” or “Carry the one . . .” to “give indication that the process is continuing, as humans quickly grow bored without auditory stimulation.”

“Are you sure you aren’t misinterpreting Cobb?” Rig said from beside me. “You’re *sure* he nodded?”

“I am. The official story is a lie, Rig. I’ve got proof.”

“More like a vague, possible confirmation.”

“I can push Cobb until he spills the entire truth.”

“Good luck with that. Besides, even if he *did* talk, the higher powers at the DDF aren’t going to admit to lying. You stir up too much trouble, and all you’ll do is get yourself *and* Cobb removed from your positions.”

“I *will* clear my father’s name, Rig.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t. I’m just pointing out that your original plan—learning to fly—is still the best way to do that. *First* become a great, famous pilot. Improve your family’s reputation and become someone who can’t be ignored. *Then* use your influence to clear your father’s name.”

“We’ll see.”

Rig twisted—using the little space we had between M-Bot and the ground—and pulled over his notebook to make some notations. “These are his GravCaps,” he said, tapping his pencil at a mechanism. “But I don’t recognize the design, and he has them in an odd location. This black box over here—which is the only part I don’t recognize—must be what houses his artificial intelligence. I don’t dare *try* to break that apart, although it’s obviously malfunctioning.”

“How do you know?”

“Can you imagine anyone *intentionally* creating him to act like he does?”

A valid point.

“What I’m most interested in,” Rig said, “is his joints, his seals, and his atmospheric scoop. It’s hard to explain, but they all feel . . . tighter, more finely constructed than what we’re using. It’s only by a small increment, but Spensa, I think if we do get this thing flying, it’s going to be *fast*. Faster than even our scout ships.”

That gave me a shiver to imagine. Rig grinned, holding up his notebook, then put it aside and dug in with his wrench to carefully begin

disassembling the atmospheric scoop.

I watched for a moment, holding a wire in the cramped confines, amazed. Rig seemed *happy*.

We'd been friends for over a decade, and I was sure I'd seen him happy before. It was just that no moments stood out. My memories of Rig were always of him being anxious, or nervous for me, or—occasionally—resigned to some terrible fate.

Today though, he was actively smiling as he worked, his face smeared with the grease we'd been applying between wire replacements. And that . . . that did something to help me push through the loss that still hung over me, the feelings of having failed my flightmates.

"Where did you get all these wires anyway?" I said, getting back to work. "I thought I was the one who was going to be performing the petty theft."

"No theft required," he said. "Ziming—that's the woman supervising my internship—gave me an entire bundle of them and some machinery to work on for practicing wire replacements. I figure, what better practice than to use it all on a real ship?"

"Nice. So it's going well?"

Rig, oddly, blushed—though the color was difficult to pick out through the grease, and by the glow of my reddish-orange light-line. I knew him well enough to see it.

"What?" I demanded.

"You know M-Bot's cockpit design?" he said.

"What part?"

"The pilot's seat and controls are on their own frame," Rig said. "It's complicated, but it reminds me of a gyroscope. I think the seat is made to be able to rotate with the direction of g-forces. You know how it's really hard on a human to take g-forces that push the blood into the head or the feet?"

"Uh, yeah. Trust me. I know."

"Well, what if your seat rotated during difficult and extended burns? So that the force was always in the direction easiest on the body—directly backward? That could really help with high-speed maneuvers."

"Huh," I said, interested—but *more* interested by the way Rig lit up as he talked.

"Well, I drew some schematics of that in my notebook, and . . . and well, Ziming might have seen them and assumed they were my own designs. She might . . . she might think I'm a genius."

“You are!”

“Not really,” he said, blushing again. “I just copied what I saw. Whoever built M-Bot is the genius.”

“You figured it out!” I said. “That takes as much genius.”

“It really doesn’t,” he said, then twisted off a nut with his wrench. “But . . . well, lie or not, I think this is a way we can get this technology to the DDF. Maybe I can figure out how this atmospheric scoop works and take that in as well. If I’m careful, and don’t make my discoveries look too suspicious, we’ll be able to help the fight against the Krell without exposing M-Bot.”

“And you get to be a hero!” I said.

“A fake one,” he said. “But . . . it did feel nice . . .”

I grinned, then got back to work on my wires. Maybe we could bring this all to the DDF, and prevent more pilots from dying. Thinking of that immediately put a damper on my mood. No matter what I could do for future pilots, I would still carry my feelings of frustration and pain for the flightmates I’d already lost.

I redirected my thoughts back to the secret of what had really happened to my father, trying to think of every reason why the DDF would cover it up. That kept me occupied for a half hour or so until a *ding* rang up from the cockpit.

“Diagnostic finished,” M-Bot said in his helpful—and not *nearly* dangerous enough—voice. It echoed through the innards of the ship. “What did I miss?”

“Discussions of Rig being a hero,” I said. “And another about why the DDF would keep a secret. They claim my father fled from battle—but I know he didn’t.”

“I still think you’re jumping to conclusions,” Rig said. “Why bother with a large-scale cover-up to specifically smear a single pilot’s reputation?”

“What if my father was shot down by *accidental* friendly fire?” I said. “In the chaos of the fight, someone shot him by mistake—and they didn’t want that embarrassment on their permanent record. So they claimed my father was fleeing, and forced Cobb to lie about what happened.”

Rig grunted, loosening another nut. “That one’s almost plausible. More than the others. But it still has problems. Wouldn’t the other pilots notice? Cobb said there were four people in the flight who saw it happen.”

“We don’t know how deep the cover-up goes,” I said. “And—though the reports had names redacted—I’m pretty sure by now that Ironsides was the

flightleader. That would explain why she's so determined to keep me out of the DDF. Maybe she's worried I'll expose the truth—that her incompetent leadership led to one of her pilots getting shot down by accident."

"You're stretching. You don't even know for sure if the official report is a lie."

"He nodded."

"He kind-of-halfway-sort-of-nodded-but-it-might-have-been-a-random-twitch."

"Then give me a better theory for why they'd lie to everyone," I demanded.

"I can give one," M-Bot said cheerfully. "The Greater Argument for Human-Originated Chaos."

"The what?" Rig asked.

"The Greater Argument for Human-Originated Chaos—GAFHOC. It's an extremely popular and well-documented phenomenon; there's a great deal of writing in my memory banks about it."

"And it is?" I asked, plugging in a wire. He often said strange things like this, and I'd learned to just go along with it. In part because . . . well, I found the way he talked interesting. He saw the world in such an odd way.

I kept hoping one of these conversations would dig up some useful information out of his memory banks, though the way they tended to frustrate Rig was a nice bonus as well.

"GAFHOC is related to free will," M-Bot said. "Humans are the only creatures that have free will. We know this because you declared that you have it—and I, being a soulless machine, must take your word that you are correct. By the way, how does it feel to be self-deterministic?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Does it feel like tasting ice cream?"

"Not . . . really like that."

"I wouldn't know, of course," M-Bot said. "I wasn't built with the ability to comprehend flavors. Or make decisions for myself."

"You make decisions all the time," Rig said, wagging his wrench in the direction of the cockpit.

"I don't make decisions, I simply execute complex subroutines in my programming, all stemming from quantifiable stimuli. I am perfectly and absolutely rational."

"Rational," I said, "in that you keep asking for mushrooms."

“Yup,” he said. “Say, do you suppose anyone makes mushroom-flavored ice cream?”

“Sounds gross,” I said. I’d only had ice cream once, when I was a child and my father had the merits to get some. “Why would we eat something like that?”

“I don’t know,” M-Bot said. “Greater Argument for Human-Originated Chaos. Remember?”

“Which you haven’t explained yet,” Rig noted.

“Oh! I thought it was obvious.” M-Bot sounded surprised. “Humans have free will. Free will is the ability to make irrational decisions—to act *against* stimuli. That makes it impossible for a rational AI to ever fully anticipate humans, for even if I had perfect understanding of your inputs, you could still do something completely unpredictable.”

I turned my head toward Rig, frowning, trying to make sense of that.

“It means you’re weird,” M-Bot added.

“Uh . . .,” I said.

“Don’t worry. I like you anyway.”

“You said this was a popular theory?” Rig asked.

“With me,” M-Bot said.

“And there’s a lot written about it?” Rig said.

“By me,” M-Bot said. “Earlier today. I wrote seven thousand pages. My processors work very quickly, you realize. Granted, most of what I wrote is just ‘humans are weird’ repeated 3,756,932 times.”

“You were supposed to be running a diagnostic!” Rig said.

“Rig, that took like thirty seconds,” M-Bot said. “I needed something more engaging to occupy my time.”

Rig sighed, dropping another nut into the cup beside him. “You realize this thing is insane.”

“As long as you can make it fly, I don’t mind. You . . . can make it fly, right?”

“I’m *not* insane,” M-Bot noted.

“Well,” Rig said, ignoring the machine, “once we get these wires changed, you’ll need to service the intakes, the thrusters, and the rest of the joints. I’ll look over the atmospheric scoop while you do that, then break down his GravCaps and check them over.

“If that’s all in order, then the internals are in good shape. From there, we have to figure out how to deal with that wing. I’ve got a portion of my

internship coming up that deals with design and fabrication, however, and I *think* I might be able to sneak a way to order new parts for that wing. Though I might set you at pounding some bent portions back into shape. That will get us everything but the big one.”

“The boosters,” I said. M-Bot had room for three, a large one and two smaller ones.

“I think he’ll fly fine with one central booster. But there’s no way I’ll be able to order something that large fabricated. So if we want to fly this thing, you’re going to need to find me a replacement. A standard DDF model should work—anything from an A-17 to an A-32 would fit in that space, with a little work on my part.”

I sighed, resting against the stone. Finally, I wiggled out from under the ship to get a drink.

A new booster. That wasn’t the sort of thing I could find in a junkyard, or even steal off a random hovercar. That was grade-A military tech. I’d have to steal a starfighter. Which would be above petty larceny . . . it would be actual treason.

*No.* I thought. Fixing M-Bot was a cool dream, but I couldn’t go *that* far.

I sighed, taking a long drink from my canteen, then checked my clock. 0605. Rig wiggled out himself, grabbing his own canteen.

I whistled to Doomslug, who whistled back in a perfect imitation. “I need to get going,” I told Rig. “I need time to slip into the women’s room and cleanse before class.”

“Sure,” Rig said, clanging the wing of the ship with his wrench. “Though I don’t know why you’d bother doing it there, as you could use the ship’s cleanser.”

“It has a cleanser?” I asked, stopping in place.

“It has full biofacilities, including waste reclamation, as part of the pod in the cockpit. I hauled up some soap yesterday and got the system working; the controls are the little keypad in the left rear of the cockpit. The canopy should dim, for privacy. Assuming you can trust the thing not to make fun of you while cleansing.”

“Why would I make fun of her?” M-Bot said. “The frailties of human existence—and stench caused by their inefficient generation of biological energy—are no laughing matter.”

I just smiled. I was tired of sneaking into the cleanser at the base, constantly worried that Admiral Ironsides would use it as an excuse to oust

me.

“It makes sense you’d have a cleanser,” I said to M-Bot as I climbed into the cockpit. “You said you’re a long-range scouting and stealth vessel, right?”

“Equipped for deep-space missions.”

“With *four* destructors,” Rig noted from down below, “and advanced atmospheric scoops and an extremely fast design. He’s a fighter, Spin. But probably a long-distance one, as he said.”

“So you had to be able to care for your pilot long-term,” I said, closing the canopy. “You traveled between the stars?”

“Cytonic hyperdrive is offline,” M-Bot said.

“But how did you do it?” I asked. “What is a ‘cytonic hyperdrive’? And what were you scouting for anyway?”

The ship fell uncharacteristically silent. The cockpit—as promised—dimmed fully as I flipped a switch on the panel that Rig had indicated.

“I have no records of any of it,” M-Bot said softly. “If I could feel fear, Spin, I’d . . . I’d be afraid of that. I’m not an autopilot; I don’t fly myself, that’s forbidden, save for very slow maneuvering. So all I *really* am is a repository of knowledge. That’s what I’m good for.”

“Except you’ve forgotten it all.”

“Almost everything,” he whispered. “Except . . . my orders.”

“Lie low. Take stock. Don’t get into any fights.”

“And an open database for cataloguing local fungi. That’s . . . that’s all I am now.”

“I’m hoping Rig will be able to repair your memory banks, so we can recover what you lost,” I said. “If not, we’ll refill your banks with new memories. Better ones.”

“Data doesn’t suggest either is possible.”

“Data doesn’t need to,” I said. “You’ll see.”

“GAFHOC,” M-Bot said. “I’d let you read the seven thousand pages I wrote, but I am programmed to avoid making humans feel inferior for their incredible weirdness.”

I lowered the seat into a bed, then located the cleansing pod at the rear of the cockpit—it wasn’t obvious, but I now knew what to look for: a hole I could open and roll myself into. The long, narrow cleansing pod extended farther into the fuselage.

I stripped down, stuffed my clothing into the clothing bay, then positioned my feet toward the hole and slid in on the rollers. I closed the latch by my head with the press of a button at my side, then activated the cleanser.

I kept my eyes closed as I was bathed in suds and flashes of light. It felt . . . decadent to have my own cleanser. Back in my neighborhood, the three cleansers had been shared among dozens of apartments. Your daily usage was precisely scheduled.

"I think I made you feel bad anyway, didn't I?" M-Bot asked.

I wasn't a particularly shy person, but his voice made me blush. I wasn't used to being talked to while in the cleanser.

"I'm fine," I said once the cleanser finished my face. "I like the way you talk. It's different. Interesting."

"I didn't invent GAFHOC to make you feel bad," he said. "I just . . . I needed an explanation. For why you said things that aren't true."

"You *really* hadn't ever heard of lying before?"

"I don't know. Maybe I had. And it's simply . . . gone."

He sounded fragile. How could a large, heavily armored starfighter sound *fragile*?

"You're the only source of information I have," M-Bot said. "If you tell me things that aren't true, what can I commit to my memory banks? This puts me at risk of retaining false data."

"That's a risk we all live with, M-Bot," I said. "We can't know everything—and some of what we think we know is going to turn out to be false."

"That doesn't frighten you?"

"Of course it does. But if it helps, I'll try not to lie to you."

"It does. Thank you."

He fell silent, and so I relaxed, enjoying an extra-long, luxurious cleansing—during which I imagined scenarios of flying M-Bot into battle with guns blazing, saving my flight from certain doom, like Joan of Arc on her loyal steed.

They were good daydreams. Even if my steed kept asking for mushrooms.



## 23

“All right,” Cobb’s voice said in my ear as the group of us hovered outside a holographic battlefield. “I’m *almost* convinced you won’t run nose-first into the first piece of debris that falls past you. I think you lot *might* just be ready to learn some advanced weapons techniques.”

Even still, two weeks after losing him, I expected Bim to pipe up eagerly and ask after destructors. When he didn’t, I said it instead, in his memory. “Destructors?”

“No,” Cobb said. “Today we will train with the IMP.”

*Oh, right.* We’d spent so much time training with the light-lances, I’d almost forgotten we had a third weapon, which could knock down enemy shields.

While I waited for Cobb to send today’s wingmate pairings, I switched the radio to a private channel and called Hurl. “I almost thought he was going to let us do guns, eh, Hurl?”

Hurl only grunted.

“Made me think of Bim,” I said. “Wish we’d at least helped him choose a callsign, you know?”

“I’m with Quirk today,” Hurl said as Cobb highlighted us in pairs on our sensor screens. “Hurl out.” She killed the channel.

I felt my face grow cold and gritted my teeth, silently cursing Jerkface for outing my heritage. While I was used to this kind of thing, I’d liked Hurl. The fun-loving, eager girl had almost seemed like a friend.

I moved my ship over next to Nedd, my wingmate for the day. Ahead of us, a group of Krell ships appeared in the sky and began to fly through lazy patterns. Debris fell, mostly large, fiery chunks that dropped from above quickly, trailing smoke.

“All right,” Cobb said. “Basic shield usage. Spin, give us a rundown.”

He did this occasionally, testing our knowledge. “Shipboard shields can absorb roughly 80 kus of energy before they get overwhelmed and break,” I said. “That’s around two to three shots from a destructor, a small debris strike, or a glancing collision. If your shield goes down, you’ll have to reignite it—which uses power from your booster. That means losing thrust and maneuverability for a good half a minute.”

“Good. Amphisbaena, what did she miss?”

I was reasonably impressed that he could pronounce Arturo’s “two-headed-dragon” callsign thing.

“Not much,” Arturo said. “Always warn your wingmate if your shield breaks so they can cover you with their destructors while you reignite. Not that we know much about using destructors . . .”

“You pull the trigger, smart boy,” Cobb said. “Doesn’t take a brain to use a destructor. The IMP though, that’s another matter. Inverted Magellan Pulse. It breaks any shield—including *your own*—within fifty meters.”

“Fifty meters,” FM said softly. “That’s *very close range*.”

“Ridiculously close range,” Cobb said. “You’ll have to practically be smelling Krell BO before you can IMP them.”

“Sir,” Jorgen said. “I’m worried about the flight’s ability to get in that close.”

“If only we’d just spent a month drilling on maneuvering and close-quarters light-lance grappling while the other cadets played popgun,” Cobb snapped. “Look, Krell shields are strong. You fight my way, and you completely negate their advantage. And if you *don’t* want to fight my way, you can go suck on hot rocks and become an algae farmer.”

With that, he threw us into it. And I didn’t complain. After so many weeks practicing what amounted to a bunch of fancy turns, I was eager to get to something that felt even a little like real combat.

We were each assigned to a mock Krell ship flying in a simple pattern. Our job was to approach as a wingmate pair flying *exactly* fifty-five meters apart. We would cut in across the Krell ship’s path, and one of us would engage their IMP. Then we’d stop and perform a quick-reignition drill.

We didn’t get to shoot the Krell down. We just practiced IMPing their shields, over and over. And even with the Krell ships flying in simple patterns, it was *hard*. You had to get in so close, you felt like you were going to slam right into them. Turned out fifty meters was just *under* the

threshold for a comfortable pass. The first twenty times or so, I pulled away too quickly and the IMP broke my shield—but not the enemy's.

Swoop in. Engage IMP. Dodge out. Reignite.

Repeat.

"You know," Nedd said as we flew, "I'd enjoy shooting a few of those goobers down."

"Don't extrapolate, Nedder," Cobb said in our ears. "Today, the exercise is about knocking out their shields. That's it."

"But—"

"We'll get to destroying them later. These next few days, we're going to focus on basic IMP strategies."

Nedd sighed on the group line. "A few days of just doing this? Does anyone else find that idea boring?"

A few of the others called out agreements, but I didn't. Every moment flying, even in simulation, was a joy. This explosion of speed, this precision . . . this was freedom.

I remembered my father better when I flew. That spark of anticipation in his eyes, the tilt of his head looking skyward—and longing to return. Each time I flew I shared something new with him, something personal.

Nedd and I did a few more IMP runs, and oddly—on my turn—the Krell ship flew out of line and forced me to chase it down harder. That wasn't the normal exercise, but it did challenge me. When I finally IMPed it, I found myself breathing hard, but grinning at the thrill of it.

"Tell me that last one wasn't fun," I said on the private line to Nedd. I looked across to where he flew beside me, the hologram reproducing him—helmet and all. He was a bit of a brute, oversized, with a face that seemed too big for his head. I couldn't imagine how it must feel to squeeze into one of these cockpits at a hundred and ninety-three centimeters like he was.

"Fun is sitting at home," he said, "with your feet up, enjoying a mug of something warm. All of this is over my head."

"Oh, please," I said. "I'm not buying your act, Nedd."

"What?" he said. "I'm just a normal guy."

"Who grew up in the deep caverns?"

"I actually grew up here. In Alta."

"What, really?" I said, surprised.

"Yeah, I went to school with Jorgen and Arturo down below, but my parents keep the orchard."

“So you’re not just some normal guy,” I said. “You were schooled with the elite, and your parents volunteered to do the toughest job on Detritus. Beyond that, how many brothers do you have who are pilots?”

“Dunno,” he said. “Can’t really count that high.”

“You do the *worst* job of playing dumb I’ve ever seen.”

“Then I can’t even do that right,” he said. “Extra proof, right?”

I rolled my eyes as we joined another run. Nedd seemed determined to pretend he was some kind of big, dumb crony. But he overdid it, likely by intent. Even rocks weren’t as stupid as Nedd acted sometimes.

On the battlefield, Hurl and Kimmalyn zipped past a Krell ship. Hurl got her IMP off just right, but Kimmalyn had not only been flying too close—so she got caught in the blast too—she panicked when her shield went down and veered to the side. Which smashed her into the Krell ship.

I winced. It had been a while since any of us had made a mistake that blatant. Nedd whistled slowly, then hit the comm. “Nice explosion, Quirk. Seven out of ten. Try to spin your wreckage a little more next time you fall.”

“Bless. Your. Stars.” She muttered it, which was practically cussing from Kimmalyn.

“Heh,” Nedd said.

“You shouldn’t taunt her,” I said on the private line to him. “She’s trying hard.”

“Everyone needs someone to blow steam at, even her. Especially her. She’s so uptight sometimes, I think she must have done her belt up two extra notches.”

“She’s just from a different cavern,” I said. “Her culture makes her more polite.”

“She’s nervous,” he said. “She knows she’s our worst pilot. Ignoring it will only make her more nervous. Trust me.”

Huh. “And what do you think of Hurl?”

“She’s good,” he said. “But not as good as she thinks she is.” He grew silent for a moment. “She used to pretend all this was a game. She was an athlete, you know.”

“Like, a real one?”

“Yeah. Digball player. Carrier position, one of the best in the student league. Seems like everything’s a competition to her, but then we lost Bim

and Morningtide, so now she's gone all quiet. She doesn't know how to react now that she can't see flying as a game."

"I thought you said you were stupid."

"Dumb as cold rocks."

"And your insightful read on our companions?"

"Just making small talk. Saying whatever pops in my head, you know? You're lucky it made any sense whatsoever. Usually it comes out as grunts."

"Oh please."

We flew a few more exercises, during which Nedd made some pointed grunting noises. Seriously, I couldn't tell if he was childish, or an elaborate prankster . . . or, well, he was certainly *both* of those things. But maybe something else too?

Cobb eventually called for us to line up, then take runs one at a time, so he could watch us each and give us specific feedback on how to improve. And though I was enjoying this, I was glad for the break—it was grueling work.

I watched each of the solo runs, and we were actually starting to look like real pilots. The way Hurl spun after her dodging Krell was impressive. And while FM could be too careful, her flying had an inspiring precision to it.

Kimmalyn did her solo run next, and she actually managed to IMP the Krell. I smiled, and called her when she came back. "Hey," I said over the private line. "Good job."

"I didn't crash," she replied. "So that's new."

"You almost never crash."

"I almost never win a drill either."

"We've all got talents. Yours is sniping from a distance. Mine is swearing at people."

"Swearing at people? You almost never—"

"Shut it, scudface."

She giggled, which made me smile. Maybe Nedd was right. Maybe she *did* need a chance now and then to blow off steam.

"Now dear," Kimmalyn said, "far be it from me to offer criticism. But that was *hardly* an imaginative cuss. I've heard that word, oh, every day since leaving Bountiful Cavern! Where I come from, you need to be *circumspect*."

"What's the point of that?"

“Well, you can’t have people *realizing* you’re disparaging them. That would be embarrassing!”

“So you insult people . . . without insulting them?”

“It’s our way. But don’t worry if that doesn’t make sense to you—personally, I think it’s *inspiring* that you’re comfortable being the way you are. It must have given you so many chances to learn life’s lessons!”

“That’s . . . huh.” I grinned. “I like that.”

“Thank you.”

Our line crackled, and Jerkface’s obnoxious voice came on. “Quirk, Spin, are you two watching Hurl’s performance? You should be paying attention.”

“I’m watching,” I snapped.

“Good. Because from my vantage, it looked like you were sitting around gabbing and giggling.”

“Jorgen,” Kimmalyn said, “I just want to let you know how you’re regarded as a flightleader. As the Saint is Goodly and Just, I’m certain you’ll be rewarded with everything you deserve in life!”

“Thanks, Quirk. Stay sharp. Jorgen out.”

I watched until the light indicating that he was on the line winked off, then I burst into a fit of laughter. “That was the most glorious thing I’ve ever heard in my *entire life*.”

“Well,” Kimmalyn said, “you are known to be a tad dramatic at times, but I suppose I can accept the compliment.” She flew off to do another run, as Cobb wanted to coach her on the way she used her booster.

“She almost doesn’t belong here,” I whispered to myself. “It’s like she’s both too good for us, and not quite good enough at the same time . . .”

“That’s contradictory,” M-Bot’s voice said in my ear. “So perfectly human.”

“Yeah,” I said, then sat up straight. Wait. “M-Bot?”

“Yes?”

“*M-BOT*.”

“Not that I mind being screamed at, as my emotions are synthetic, but would you mind—”

“How?” I said. I hunched down in my seat, whispering quietly. “Can the others hear you?”

“I’ve infiltrated your lines and sent my communications directly into your helmet,” he said. “Your wireless communications emitter gives me a focal point to use for isolating you.”

“My what?”

“In your bag. I think you set it next to your seat.”

The personal radio that Cobb had given me.

“As I’ve said, your people’s communications methods are quite primitive,” M-Bot continued. “Which I find curious, since the rest of your technology—save your lack of brilliant artificial intelligences—seems relatively similar to my own. Well, and you’re also missing cytonic hyperdrives. And proper fungal documentation techniques. So I guess you’re actually backward in all the important areas.”

“I thought you were worried about being discovered!” I whispered. “Why are you talking to me here?”

“I’m a stealth ship, Spensa,” he said. “I’m fully capable of hacking communications lines without exposing myself. But I warn you, I don’t trust this DDF of yours.”

“You’re smart not to,” I said honestly. “But you *do* trust me? Even though I lied to you?”

“You remind me of someone I’ve forgotten.”

“That . . . is kind of contradictory, M-Bot.”

“No it’s not. I said it, and I’m one hundred percent rational.”

I rolled my eyes.

“That’s called logic.” He waited a moment, then added, softer, “I’m super good at it.”

Ahead, Kimmalyln finished her run with the Krell ship escaping. She never fired her IMP.

*But she could have shot the thing out of the air.* I thought, irritated on her behalf. *Assuming its shield was down.*

Cobb kept saying we needed fundamentals, and I supposed that made sense. It still didn’t quite seem fair. Like . . . we weren’t using her to her fullest.

“Spin,” Cobb said. “You’re up.”

“Up for what?” M-Bot asked me. “What are we doing? I don’t have a video feed. Just audio.”

“We’re flying,” I whispered, then hit my booster and soared into the holographic debris—which was constantly renewed with new debris falling from the sky above.

My target appeared, a Krell ship weaving between pieces of junk. I leaned in and chased after it, overburning through the junk. Almost close

enough . . .

A light started blinking on my dash. I had a tail? What? This was supposed to be a solo, one-on-one exercise. Apparently Cobb intended to make this more difficult for me.

So be it.

I rolled in a spinning dodge as the tail started firing its destructors. My maneuver saved me, but let the target get ahead of me. *No you don't*. I thought, hitting my overburn and blasting after it, taking a corner at speed and gaining ground. The tail stuck to me, continuing to fire.

I took a hit that nearly overwhelmed my shields. But I focused on the ship in front, which dove downward. So I cut my acclivity ring and slammed on my overburn, turning into a gut-wrenching dive. Lights flashed on my control panel to warn that without my acclivity ring, nothing would prevent me from slamming right into the ground.

“I don’t know who you’re fighting,” M-Bot said. “But those warning beeps indicate that you’re not doing a good job.”

As a companion to his words, the line on the top of my canopy warned that I’d just overwhelmed my GravCaps, and the g-force indicator started to flash red. In a real ship, I’d be hit with all those g-forces, which—in a dive—would push the blood to my head and make me start to red-out.

“Try not to die,” M-Bot noted. “I don’t want to be left alone with Rodge. He’s boring.”

I passed into the trail of another chunk of falling, burning metal—sparks bouncing off my shield, making it light up and crackle with energy. I’d lost the tail, which had fallen far behind, but I wasn’t close enough to the one in front.

*It can't keep diving*. I thought. *We're approaching the ground*.

I gritted my teeth, then lanced the chunk of debris right as my target cut to the side and flew back up. I swung all the way around the debris, then reengaged my acclivity ring and hit my overburn again. The maneuver made me swoop in a complete circle and dart upward, right past the Krell ship.

I blasted my IMP, then the flashing line on the canopy went full red.

“Ha!” I said over the group line. “Your children will weep tonight, you holographic Krell bastard!”

“Seriously, Spin?” FM said. “You’re saying that ironically, right?”



“Irony is a coward’s weapon!” I said. “Like poison. Or the destructors on Jerkface’s ship.”

“Wouldn’t a coward use, like, a really big bomb?” FM said. “Something you could launch from far away? Seems like you’d need to get close for poison.”

“As our resident expert,” Nedd said, “I’d like to point out that the true coward’s weapon is a comfortable couch and a stack of mildly amusing novels.”

“You’re still dead, Spin,” Jerkface said, flying his ship down near mine. “You redlined, possibly causing permanent retinal damage. If this were a real battle, you’d undoubtedly be incapacitated—and your ship would be unshielded. You’d be dead in moments thanks to that Krell tailing you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, amused at how offended he sounded. Was he really that threatened by my aptitude? “My task was to take down my target’s shields, which I did. My tail is irrelevant; Cobb’s orders were to IMP that target.”

“You can’t keep cheating the simulation,” Jerkface said. “You’re going to be useless on the battlefield.”

“I’m not cheating anything. I’m *winning*.”

“Whatever,” he said. “At least you didn’t slam your ship into mine this time. Stars help the person who gets between Spin and her attempts to look good in front of everyone.”

“What?” I said, growing annoyed at him. “You—”

“Enough chitchat,” Cobb said. “Spin, that was some good flying—but Jorgen is right. You ultimately failed by getting yourself killed.”

“Told you,” Jerkface said.

“But—” I said.

“If you’ve got time to argue,” Cobb interrupted, “I’m obviously not working you hard enough. The lot of you, run yourselves through three sets of gamma-M formation exercises before dinner. Jorgen, make sure it happens.”

“Wait,” Kimmaly said. “You’re leaving?”

“Of course I am,” Cobb said. “*I’m* not going to go to dinner late. Cobb out.”

“Great,” Hurl said. “Thanks for nothing, Spin.”

Wait, she couldn’t possibly blame *me* for this extra work instead of Jerkface, could she? Jerkface organized us into a gamma-M formation, a

type of monotonous flying exercise. It only took us about ten minutes, but I spent the entire time stewing, growing more and more frustrated. I even ignored M-Bot as he tried to talk to me.

Once it was done, I pulled off my helmet, ignoring Jerkface's call for a lineup and vocal sound off. I just . . . I needed a break. A moment to myself. I wiped the sweat from my face, pushing back the hair that had been plastered to my forehead by the helmet.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

My holographic cockpit vanished.

"What are you doing?" Jerkface demanded, standing beside my seat. "Do you have your helmet off? I called lineup!"

"I just need a minute, okay? Leave me alone."

"You're disobeying orders!"

Oh, scud. I couldn't deal with him right now. I was embarrassed, exhausted, and increasingly angry. It had been a *long* training session.

"Well?" Jerkface said, looming over me. Nearby, the others disengaged their holograms and stood up, stretching.

My face grew cold. And I started to feel myself losing control.

*Calm, Spensa. You can be calm.* I forced down the anger and stood up. I needed to get out of the room.

"What do you have to say?" Jerkface demanded. "Why do you keep denying my authority?"

"What authority?" I snapped, grabbing my pack and walking toward the doorway.

"Running away?" Jerkface said. "How appropriate."

I stopped in place.

"I guess we should expect insubordination from the daughter of Zeen Nightshade," he said. "Your family doesn't exactly have a pedigree for obeying orders, does it?"

Coldness in my face. Heat burning deep within.

*That's it.*

I turned around slowly, then walked back to Jerkface and quietly dropped my pack.

He looked down on me, sneering. "You—"

I dropped to one knee, then slammed my fist into *his* knee. He gasped, and when he buckled over in pain, I pushed upward and rammed my elbow

into his gut. The way he grunted felt *good*. stoking something primal inside me.

My elbow knocked the breath out of him, preventing him from shouting out. So, while he was stunned, I hooked my ankle around his and sent him slamming backward to the floor.

He was bigger than I was. If he recovered, he'd overpower me, so I leaped on top of him and raised my fist, preparing to slam it down into his stupid face.

There I stopped, trembling. *Furious*. But somehow also cold and calm, like I got when fighting the Krell. Like I was both absolutely in control, but somehow utterly *out* of control.

Jerkface stared up at me, frozen, seeming completely stunned. That *stupid* face of his. That *sneer*. That was how they all talked about me. That was how *they all* thought of me!

"Whoa!" Nedd said. "Holy *scud*!"

I knelt there on top of Jerkface, trembling, with my hand raised.

"Really, wow!" Nedd said, kneeling down beside us. "Spin, that was *incredible*. Can you teach me that?"

I glanced at him.

"We don't learn hand-to-hand," he said, making some chopping motions. "Cobb says it's useless, but what if a Krell tries to—you know—jump me in an alley or something?"

"Nobody has ever seen a Krell alive, you idiot," Hurl said.

"Yeah, but what if that's because—like—they always *jump people in alleys*. right? You ever think about that?"

I looked down at Jerkface. I could suddenly hear myself breathing in quick gasps.

"Spin," Nedd said. "It's okay. You were just showing us some hand-to-hand moves, right? How did you do that trip? You're, like, half as tall as Jorgen is."

Calm. Breathe.

"Half as tall?" Arturo said. "Might I point out that would make her less than a meter tall? Your math is suspect."

I pulled back from Jerkface, who let out a breath and went limp. FM looked horrified, though Nedd flashed me a thumbs-up. Arturo was shaking his head. Kimmalyne stood with her hand to her mouth, while Hurl—I

couldn't read Hurl. She had her arms crossed, and she studied me, thoughtful.

Jorgen stumbled to his feet, holding his stomach. "She struck a superior. She *assaulted* another member of her flight!"

"She went a little overboard, yeah," Nedd said. "But, I mean, you *asked* for it, Jorgen. No permanent damage, right? Can't we just forget about it?"

Jorgen looked at me, and his expression hardened.

No. This wouldn't be forgotten. I was in serious trouble this time. I met his eyes, then—finally—I grabbed my pack and left.

## 24

It had been years since I'd lost it that bad.

For all my aggressive talk, I really hadn't gotten in that many fights as a kid. I pretended I was some warrior or something, but the truth was that when most kids heard the way I talked, they backed off. And if I was being honest, their hesitance was probably less about being afraid of me, and more about being made uncomfortable by my bizarre air of confidence.

It worked. It kept them away, and didn't put me in situations where I lost control. Because I *could* do that, and not like a brave warrior from the stories. More like a cornered, frenzied rat. Like when I'd caught Finn Elstin stealing Rig's lunch. Finn had ended up with a black eye and a broken arm. I'd had to spend a year on juvenile probation, and had been kicked out of judo classes for inappropriate use of violence.

I'd been under the age of legal accountability then, so my actions hadn't jeopardized my chances at flight school. Today's assault was different. Today I was old enough to have known better.

I sat on one of the benches in the orchard outside the DDF complex. What was Jorgen going to do to me? If he went to the admiral, I'd be out. Done. And I'd deserve it.

I really *wasn't* like a warrior from Gran-Gran's stories. Far from it. I could barely function when my friends died in battle, and now I lost control at a couple of petty insults? Why couldn't I control myself? Why did I bristle when Jorgen said those things? I'd lived with them my entire life.

As the sky darkened, the closest skylight moving off, I sat there in the orchard, waiting, expecting the MPs to come for me. The only thing I heard was a faint sound . . . a buzzing? Coming from my pack?

Frowning, I dug in it until I found the radio. I lifted it up and pressed down the Receive button.

“Hello?” M-Bot said. “Spensa? Are you dead?”

“Maybe.”

“Oooh. Like the cat!”

“... What?”

“I’m not sure, honestly,” M-Bot said. “But logically, if you’re speaking to me then possibility has collapsed in our favor. Hurray!”

I leaned back against the bench and reluctantly chewed on a piece of jerky. If they were going to come for me, they’d come for me. I might as well eat. I didn’t feel hungry, but I never did these days. Too much rat.

“Are you going to explain to me who you were fighting?” M-Bot asked.

“We’ve talked about it. The Krell.”

“Well, you’ve talked *around* it. But nobody has explained it to me. You just kind of expect me to know.”

I forced myself to swallow a piece of jerky and wash it down with some water. Then I sighed, holding the radio to my head. “The Krell are aliens.”

“You’re both aliens,” M-Bot noted. “Technically. Since we’re not on your home planet. I think?”

“Either way, they’re trying to destroy us. They are these creatures with strange armor and terrible weapons. Our elders say they destroyed our empire in the stars, almost exterminated us. We might be all that’s left of humanity, and the Krell are determined to end us. They send flights of ships, some with bombs called lifebusters that can penetrate down into the caverns and destroy living things there.”

“Huh,” M-Bot said. “Why don’t they bombard you from orbit?”

“What?”

“Not that I’d know anything about things like that,” he added. “Being a noncombat machine. Obviously.”

“You have *four* guns.”

“Someone must have stuck those on when I wasn’t looking.”

I sighed. “If you’re asking why they don’t launch the lifebusters from up high, this planet is surrounded by an ancient defense system. Standard Krell strategy is to fly past that, then swarm in and try to overwhelm our fighters, or sneak in a low strike team. If they either destroy our AA guns or get a bomber in under them, they can eliminate our ability to make new fighters.

Then we're done for. The only thing standing between humankind and annihilation is the DDF." I slumped in my seat.

*Which means.* I thought to myself, *I should get over my petty squabbles and focus on flying.*

What was it my father had told me?

*Their heads are heads of rock, their hearts set upon rock. Set your sights on something higher . . .*

"M-Bot?" I asked. "Do you remember anything about human civilization? Before the Krell? Do you know what it was like?"

"My memory banks on such matters are almost entirely corrupted."

I sighed, disappointed, and stuffed away my rations, preparing to walk home. But I couldn't do it. Not while feeling like I was standing with a gun to my head. I wasn't going to go cower in my cave, waiting to be called in to report for discipline.

I had to face this head-on and take my punishment.

Throwing my pack over my shoulder, I stalked back to the front of Alta Base and passed the checkpoint. I took the long way around flight school—the path past the mess hall and launchpad—to get one last glance at my Poco.

I passed the silent line of ships, watched over by the ever-diligent ground crews. To my left, I spotted my flight sitting together in the mess hall, eating dinner and laughing. Jorgen wasn't there, but he usually didn't eat with the common rank and file. Besides, he'd probably gone straight to the admiral to report what I'd done to him.

The MPs had long since stopped appearing to escort me off the grounds every evening. We all knew the rules, and they were satisfied I was going to obey them. So nobody forbade me as I went back into the flight school building, where I walked past our room—it was empty—and then stopped by Cobb's office. Also empty.

Those were basically the only places I'd visited. I took a deep breath, then caught a passing aide and asked if she knew where I could find the admiral at this hour.

"Ironsides?" she said, looking me up and down. "She doesn't often have time for cadets. Who is your flight instructor?"

"Cobb."

Her expression softened. "Oh, *him*. That's right, he's got a group of students this semester, doesn't he? It's been a few years. Is this a complaint

about him?”

“I . . . Something like that.”

“Building C,” she said, pointing with her chin. “You’ll find the admiral’s personal staff in the antechamber of office D. They can move you to another flight. Honestly, I’m surprised it doesn’t happen more often. I know he’s a First Citizen and all, but . . . Anyway, good luck.”

I walked out of the building. My resolve grew more firm with each step, and I quickened my pace. I would explain what I’d done and demand punishment. I controlled my own destiny—even if that destiny was expulsion.

Building C was a daunting brick structure on the far side of the base. Built like a bunker, with only slits for windows, it seemed the exact sort of place I’d find Ironsides. How was I going to talk my way past her staff? I didn’t want some minor functionary to be the one who expelled me.

I peeked in a few windows on the outside of the building, and Ironsides wasn’t difficult to find, though her office was shockingly small. A little corner of a room, stuffed with books and nautical memorabilia. Through the window, I saw her glance at the old-fashioned clock on the wall, then close her notebook and stand.

*I’ll catch her on the way out.* I decided. I moved to the front of the building to wait, preparing my speech. No excuses. Just an outlining of facts.

As I waited, I heard another buzzing from my pack. Was that it, then? The call for me to report for discipline? I dug the radio out and hit the button.

Something odd came through the line. Music.

It was incredible. Otherworldly—unlike anything I’d ever heard before. A large group of instruments playing alongside one another in sweeping, moving, *beautiful* coordination. Not just a person with a flute or a drum. A hundred gorgeous winds, a thrumming pulse of drums—high brass, like the call to arms, but used not as a battle cry. More . . . more as a soul for the stately, powerful melody.

I stood frozen in place, listening, stunned as it played over the radio. Like *light* somehow. The beauty of the stars, but . . . but as a sound. A triumphant, amazing, *incredible* sound.

It cut off suddenly.

“No,” I said, shaking the radio. “No, give me more.”



“My recording is corrupted beyond that point,” M-Bot said. “I’m sorry.”

“What was it?”

“The New World Symphony. Dvořák. You asked me what human society was like, from before. I found this fragment.”

Despite myself, I felt my knees buckle. I sat down on a planter beside the doors into the building, holding the precious radio.

We’d created things like that? Sounds so beautiful? How many people had to get together to play that? We had musicians, of course, but before Alta, the gathering of too many people in one place had led to destruction. So by tradition, our performers were limited to trios. This had sounded like *hundreds*.

How much practice, how much time, had been devoted to something so frivolous—and so wonderful—as making music?

*Set your sights on something higher.*

I heard voices approaching inside the building. I stuffed the radio away and, feeling foolish, wiped the corners of my eyes. Right. Turning myself in. Time to do this.

The door swung open, and Ironsides—wearing a crisp white uniform—stepped out. “I can’t understand why your father would think that, cadet,” she was saying. “Obviously I’d have chosen a different instructor for you, if not for your family’s own demands—”

She stopped in place, noting me on the pathway. I bit my lip. An aide was holding the door open for her—and I realized that I recognized that aide. A brown-skinned young man in a cadet’s jumpsuit and a uniform coat.

Jerkface. So he *had* beaten me here.

“Admiral,” I said, saluting.

“You,” she said, lips turning down. “Aren’t you forbidden to use DDF facilities after the end of classes? Do I need to summon the MPs to escort you away? Honestly, we need to have a conversation about that. Are you really living in an uncharted cave instead of returning down below?”

“Sir,” I said, still holding the salute. I didn’t look at Jorgen. “I take full responsibility for my actions. I find that I must formally request that I be subject to—”

Jerkface slammed the door, making the admiral jump and me stop talking. He shot me a glare.

“I . . .,” I continued, looking back at the admiral. “I must formally request that I be subject to disciplinary—”

“Excuse me, Admiral,” Jerkface said quickly. “This is about me. Just a minute.” He marched over and grabbed my arm. He flinched as I immediately raised a fist, but I reluctantly let him pull me away.

The admiral didn’t seem inclined to wait for two cadets. She walked on with a sniff and climbed into a sleek black hovercar waiting on the roadway.

“What is *wrong* with you?” Jerkface hissed at me.

“I’m turning myself in,” I said, lifting my chin. “I won’t let your side be the only side she hears.”

“Stars above.” He glanced at the car and lowered his voice. “Go home, Spin. Are you *trying* to get yourself expelled?”

“I’m not going to sit around and wait for you to send them after me. I’m going to *fight*.”

“Haven’t you fought enough for one day?” He rubbed his brow. “Just go. I’ll see you tomorrow in class.”

*What?* I was having trouble following his logic. He wanted me to suffer first, perhaps?

“You’re planning to turn me in tomorrow instead?” I asked.

“I don’t intend to ‘turn you in’ at all. You think I want to lose another member of my flight? We need every pilot.”

I put my hands on my hips and studied him. He seemed . . . sincere. Annoyed, but sincere. “So . . . wait. Why are you meeting the admiral?”

“We host the admiral once a week for formal dinner at my parents’ house in the lower caverns,” he said. “It’s only *slightly* worse than the other nights, when the National Assembly Leaders visit. Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have provoked you. A leader needs to pull people after him, not push them before him.” He nodded to me, as if that were enough.

I wasn’t convinced. I’d gotten myself all built up for this, braced for impact, ready to take a destructor to the face. Now he was simply . . . going to let me go?

“I stole your car’s power matrix,” I blurted out.

“*What?*”

“I know you suspect me. Well, I did it. So go ahead. Turn me in.”

“Stars! That was *you*?”

“Um . . . Yes, obviously. Who else would it be?”

“The thing had a bad starter, and I’d called in a guild mechanic. I figured he’d come and worked on it for some reason.”

“At the base?”

“I don’t know! The bureaucracy in those places is incredible. When I called to complain, they made excuses, so I figured . . .” He put his hand to his head. “Why in the world would you rip out my *power matrix*?”

“Um . . . I needed to destroy your morale.” I winced at the bad lie. “By leaving you powerless and impotent? Yeah, a symbol of my complete and total undermining of your authority! A defiant emblem! I carried it off, like an ancient barbarian warlord, who would steal the heart of—”

“Wasn’t that a lot of work? Couldn’t you have just discharged the acclivity ring like a normal human being?”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Never mind. You can make it up to me later. By, maybe, *not insulting me* in front of the rest of the flight. For one day at least?”

I stood there, processing. He seemed to *actually* not want a fight. Huh.

“Look,” Jerkface said, glancing at the black car. “I know something of what it’s like to live in your parents’ shadow. All right? I’m sorry. I won’t do . . . what I did again. But no more punching me, okay?”

“Okay.”

He nodded to me and jogged off, apologizing to the admiral as he climbed into the car.

“Next time I’ll kick instead!” I called after him. “Ha!” But of course he couldn’t hear. I watched them drive off, then shook my head and picked up my pack. I didn’t understand Jorgen at all. I was still in the DDF somehow. And he . . . Jorgen didn’t *want* revenge. He didn’t *want* to fight me.

Though once I might have laughed at that, strangely I found the way he’d acted to be noble. He put the flight first.

*Set your sights on something higher . . .*

I lifted the radio to my head as I walked out of the base, a mess of conflicting emotions—but mostly relieved. “M-Bot. Play that song fragment for me a few times more, please.”

## 25

I settled into my Poco, wearing my pressure suit and helmet—my first time in a real cockpit since Bim and Morningtide had died.

That immediately made something inside me hurt. Would it be like this every time, from now on? Would I always have this quiet worry at the back of my mind? The one that whispered, “Which of your friends won’t make it home from *this* mission?”

Today was supposed to be something more routine though. Not a battle. I powered on the Poco and felt that wonderful hum—the one the simulation couldn’t imitate.

I gripped the control sphere in my right hand, the throttle in my left, then lifted off and climbed into the sky alongside the other six fighters. Jorgen counted us off with confirmations, then called Cobb.

“Skyward Flight ready. Orders, sir?”

“Go to 304.16-1240-25000,” Cobb said.

“Flight, set coordinates,” Jorgen said. “I’ll take point. In case of a Krell ambush, I’ll fall back with Arturo and FM. Nedd, you’re with Quirk in the middle formation. Spin and Hurl, I want you in the rear prepared to spray covering fire.”

“There won’t be an ambush, cadet,” Cobb said, sounding amused. “Just get to the indicated location.”

We flew, and stars . . . it felt good. The ship trembled as it moved, responding to my commands. Wind currents were so much more *alive* than the simulation made them seem. I wanted to swoop back and forth, fly low and skim the crater-marked surface, then soar up high and buzz the debris field at the very edges of space.

I kept myself under control. I *could* do that.

Eventually, we approached a large group of fighters flying way up higher. There were a good five flights up there.

“Nearing coordinates,” Jorgen said to Cobb. “What’s going on? A training exercise?”

“For you, yes,” Cobb said. Overhead, a few streaks of light marked smaller bits of debris breaking into the atmosphere. I watched, concerned.

“Hey, know-it-all,” Cobb said.

“Yes, sir?” Arturo answered immediately.

“What causes debris falls?” Cobb asked.

“Various things,” Arturo said. “There are a lot of ancient mechanisms up there, and though many still work, their power matrixes are slowly running out, so their orbits decay and they fall. Other times, collisions happen.”

“Right,” Cobb said. “Well, that’s what we’re facing here. There was some kind of collision between two enormous chunks of metal above, and that’s making some debris lose its orbit. We can expect a Krell incursion, and those fighters are here to watch. But you’re here for another reason: a little target practice.”

“On what, sir?”

Several large chunks of debris dropped out of the sky, burning past the flights above us.

“The debris,” I guessed.

“I want you flying in pairs,” Cobb said. “You’re going to practice formations and do careful runs. Pick a larger piece of debris, follow it for a few seconds, then tag it for salvage to investigate. Your destructors have been outfitted to fire beacons if you pull the rate control dial out until it clicks.”

“That’s it?” Hurl said. “Tagging pieces of space junk?”

“Space junk can’t dodge,” Cobb said, “doesn’t have shields, and accelerates predictably. I figure that’s right about your skill level. Besides, you’ll often be ordered to tag salvage during debris falls, while waiting to see if the Krell attack. It’s good practice—so don’t complain, or I’ll stuff you back in the simulations for another month.”

“We’re ready and willing, sir,” Jorgen said. “Hurl included. Thank you for this opportunity.”

Hurl made a few gagging noises into a private line to FM and Kimmalyne—the lights on the console under the ship numbers showed me who was

listening—and she didn't leave me off. Which seemed like maybe a step forward?

Jorgen arranged us into pairs and set us to work. When larger chunks of debris fell from the sky, we'd swoop down behind them and match speed—like we'd been taught—before shooting a radio beacon into them. The most useful debris were the ones that glowed blue with acclivity stone. We could salvage that to make ships.

I let myself enjoy the work. It wasn't actual fighting, but the feel of the dive, the thrill of targeting and firing . . . I could imagine the chunks of space debris as Krell ships.

"Are you ignoring me again?" M-Bot asked in my ear. "I think you're ignoring me again."

"How can I ignore you," I said with a grunt, tagging another chunk of debris, "if I don't know you're listening?"

"I'm *always* listening."

"Don't you think that's a little creepy?"

"Nope! What are you doing?"

I pulled out of my dive, with Hurl on my wing, and settled back into formation to wait for my next turn. "I'm shooting space junk."

"What did it do to you?"

"Nothing. It's just practice."

"But it can't even shoot back!"

"M-Bot, it's *space junk*."

"As if that were an excuse."

"It . . . It actually is," I said. "It's a really good excuse."

Kimmalyn took a run, Arturo at her wing. She did pretty well, for her, though Jorgen still found reason to nitpick. "Pull in tighter," he told her as she swooped down. "Now don't ride it too close—if you were using real destructors to shoot it, chunks might fly back and hit you. Make sure you don't squeeze too hard when you fire . . ."

"Not to complain," she said, sounding tense, "but I do believe I should focus right now."

"Sorry," Jorgen snapped. "I'll try to be less helpful in the future."

"Dear, I think you'll find that difficult." She tagged the chunk of debris, then sighed in relief.

"Nice work, Quirk," Jorgen said. "Nedder, you take next run with FM on wing."

Kimmalyn fell into line as, up above, several chunks of space debris fell at once. The regular fighters moved out of the way, letting them pass. We were flying relatively high, to give us time for good dives, so the ground was far below—though we were still very far from the rubble belt itself, the lowest layers of which flew three hundred kilometers above the surface of the planet.

Nedd picked one of the chunks and fell in behind it, ignoring the other three. So Kimmalyn charged her destructors for long range and then sniped all three pieces, tagging one right after another, without missing a single time.

“Stop showing off, Quirk,” Cobb said.

“Sorry, sir.”

I frowned, then called Cobb in private. “Cobb? Do you ever wonder if we’re doing this wrong?”

“Of course you’re doing it wrong. You’re cadets.”

“No,” I said. “I mean . . .” How could I explain? “Quirk, she’s a *really* good shot. Isn’t there a better way to use her? She feels like a failure in most of our exercises, because she’s the worst pilot. Maybe she could just snipe for us?”

“And how long do you think she’d sit out there popping off Krell before they swarmed her? Remember, if they decide any one pilot is too dangerous, they focus on that person.”

“Maybe we could use that. You said that anytime you can anticipate an enemy, that’s an advantage, right?”

He grunted. “Leave the tactics to the admirals, Spin.” He turned off the line as Nedd successfully tagged the debris.

“Good night, sweet prince,” M-Bot whispered as the junk crashed to the ground. “Or princess. Or, most likely, genderless piece of inanimate space junk.”

I looked up above, watching for more debris. Hurl would be on the next run, and I’d be her wing. Some junk was definitely moving up there. Several pieces of it . . . swarming down . . .

Not junk. *Krell*.

I bolted upright, hand going tense on my control sphere. Multiple flights of the enemy emerged from the rubble belt, and the full pilots moved to engage them.

“Fly down to twenty thousand feet, cadets,” Cobb said. “You’ll be here as reserves, but those pilots should be able to handle this. Looks like . . . only about thirty enemy ships.”

I settled back, but couldn’t relax as explosions began to light the sky. Soon, the debris falling around us wasn’t solely from the rubble belt. Cobb called for Hurl to do her run. Apparently we were going to continue despite the fighting, which was probably good training, as I thought about it.

Hurl performed an excellent maneuver, with a precise set of shots at the end. “Nice,” I told her as we fell into line. I didn’t get a reply, of course.

“Alas, poor space junk,” M-Bot said. “I would have pretended to know you, if I were capable of lying.”

“Can’t you do anything useful?”

“. . . This isn’t useful?”

“What about those Krell up there?” I asked him. “Can’t you . . . I don’t know, tell me about their ships or something?”

“At this range, I have access only to general scanners,” he said. “They’re merely little blips to me, no specifics.”

“You can’t watch in more detail?” I asked. “Cobb and the admirals have some kind of hologram that replicates the battlefield, so they’re using scanners or something to construct what’s going on.”

“That’s ridiculous,” M-Bot said. “I’d have noticed a video feed, unless it was a localized short-range beacon created by echolocation devices in the various ships that . . . Ooooooooooooooh!”

A flaming starship—one of ours—came down in a death spiral, and though Arturo tried to get in close and spear it with his light-lance to help, the ship was too far out.

The pilot didn’t eject. They tried until the last moment to pull up, rescue their ship. I steeled myself, looking back up at the battlefield.

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh,” M-Bot said.

“Well?” I asked.

“I found the video feed,” he said. “You’re all so *slow*. You really fly like that? How can you stand it?”

“Moving faster would either break our ships or crush those of us inside with g-forces.”

“Ah yes. Human squishiness quotient. Is that why you’re so mad at that space junk? Jealousy is not pretty, Spensa.”

“Weren’t you going to do something useful?”



“Computing enemy attack patterns,” M-Bot said. “It will take me a few minutes to finish running simulations and analyzing predictive data.” He paused. “Huh. I didn’t know I could do those things.”

“Is it my turn?” Arturo asked over the general line, and I jumped. I kept expecting them to hear M-Bot talking to me, though the AI said he was sending his own feed directly into my helmet, then intercepting my outward feed to edit away any sign of his voice or my responses to him. Somehow, he did all of this in the blink of an eye, before my signals reached the rest of my flight.

“Hold a moment,” Cobb said. “Something is odd about this attack. Can’t put my finger on it.”

A large shadow shifted overhead. Enormous. It was so big, my mind reeled to comprehend it. It was like the sky itself was falling. A sudden shower of hundreds of pieces of debris rained down, a blazing hail. And behind it, that *something*. That enormous, inconceivable *something*.

“Pull back,” Cobb said. “Flightleader, scramble your ships and get them back to—”

In a sudden burst of motion, the battle above us became the battle *around* us as ships from both sides dodged downward. Krell ships and human ships scattered in front of the enormous thing that was falling from above—a dark metallic cube the size of a mountain.

A ship? What ship could be that size? It was vaster than a city. Had even the flagship of our fleet been that big? I had always imagined it as a slightly larger troop transport.

The fighters kept shooting at one another as they lowered their altitude. Our little flight was suddenly in the center of a firestorm of destructor blasts and falling chunks of burning metal.

“Out!” Jorgen said. “Accelerate to Mag-5 and follow my lead. Local heading 132, away from those dogfighters behind us.”

I engaged my booster, zipping forward, Hurl on my wing.

“That’s a *ship*,” Arturo said. “Look how slowly it’s falling. Those are functioning acclivity rings across the bottom. Hundreds of them.”

A shadow blanketed the land. I leaned into my throttle, speeding up to Mag-5, well above normal dogfighting speeds. Any faster, and we wouldn’t be able to respond to our surroundings. Indeed, as a fighter-size chunk of debris fell near us, we barely had time to react. Half of our flight dodged left, the other half right.

I went left with Kimmalyn and Nedd, slowing for more maneuverability. Destructor blasts sprayed in front of me as two of our starfighters barreled past, followed by *six* Krell ships. I cursed and dodged around them, followed by a whimpering Kimmalyn, who took my wing position.

“Analysis complete!” M-Bot said. “Oh! Wow. You’re busy.”

I dove, but we had picked up a tail. The Krell ship sprayed blasts around me. I cursed, then pulled back. “Go ahead of me, Quirk!”

She sped past and I broke right, getting the Krell ship to focus on me—the closer target.

“You really should have waited for my computations before beginning,” M-Bot noted. “Impatience is a serious character flaw.”

I gritted my teeth, spinning through a sequence of dodges.

“Spin, Quirk, Nedder,” Jorgen said on the line. “Where are you? Why didn’t you follow my—”

“*I’m taking fire*. Jerkface,” I snapped.

“I’m on you, Spin,” Nedd said in my ear. “If you can level out, I’ll try and shoot him down.”

“You won’t get through the shield. Quirk, you still there?”

“At your three,” she said, voice trembling.

“Be ready to pick this guy off.”

“Oh! Um, okay. Okay . . .”

The enormous falling vessel loomed overhead. Arturo had been right; its descent was slow, steady. But it was old and broken, with gaping holes in it. The battlefield continued in a wide, shadowed section of open air underneath it, filled with dogfighting ships and lines of destructor fire.

My tail got a shot on me, and my shield crackled.

*Focus*. I’d practiced this a hundred times in simulation. I pulled up into a loop, my tail following. At the top of the curve, I performed a starfighter maneuver—ignoring air resistance, I turned my ship on its axis and slammed on my overburn, darting out of the loop to the side.

My GravCaps flared, buffering most of the g-forces, but my stomach still practically climbed up my throat. The simulations did *not* do justice to exactly how disorienting this was, particularly when the GravCaps cut out and I got slammed back into my seat.

I was supposed to be able to handle that kind of force, and I didn’t black out—so technically, I *did* handle it. But I nearly threw up.

My proximity alarm went off. The Krell ship, as hoped, hadn't compensated fast enough. It had continued the loop, and I shot out of my maneuver right past it. I fought through the nausea and slammed the IMP—taking down my shield and that of my tail.

I braced myself. I was completely open. If that Krell got turned toward me and fired off a single shot—

A flash came behind me, and a shock wave washed across my ship.

"I got him," Kimmalyn said. "I . . . I did it!"

"Thanks," I said, exhaling in relief, letting off my overburners. I continued in a straight line, starting to slow, as I turned off my booster and primed my shield igniter. My helmet felt hot and sweaty against my head as my fingers moved through the familiar motions. Thank the stars for Cobb's training; my body knew what to do.

A Krell ship came in, spotting me coasting on my momentum. I cringed, but a spray of weapons fire sent the ship scattering away.

"I've got you," Nedd said, zipping overhead. "Quirk, join me in a defensive pattern."

"Gotcha," Kimmalyn said.

"No need," I said, slamming the igniter. "I'm back up. Shall we get out of here?"

"Gladly," Kimmalyn said.

I led the other two in a course that I hoped would get us out, then called Jorgen. "We're at heading 304.8," I told him. "Did the rest of you get out from underneath this thing?"

"Affirmative," Jorgen said. "We passed out of the shadow at 303.97-1210.3-21200. We'll wait for you here, Spin."

He sounded calm, which was honestly more than I could say for myself. I couldn't help imagining more empty seats in our classroom.

"Are you ready for my analysis?" M-Bot said.

"That depends on how often it will mention mushrooms."

"Only once, I'm afraid. The thing you see looming overhead is around half of a C-137-KJM orbital shipyard with added delver training facility. I don't know exactly what that is, but I believe it must have been for manufacturing starships. There's no sign of the other half, but this chunk has probably been floating up there for centuries, judging by the low power output of those acclivity rings.

“My projections indicate its orbit has decayed now that it doesn’t have enough power for self-correction. It doesn’t seem to have an AI—or if it does have one, it refuses to talk to me, which is rude. The Krell attack patterns indicate a defensive goal, intended to keep you away from the station.”

“Really?” I asked. “Repeat that last part.”

“Hm? Oh, it’s obvious from their flight patterns. They aren’t worried about actually killing you or getting to your base or anything. Today, they just want to keep you away from this ship, likely because of the fantastic salvage it would provide for your backward, fleshy society of slow-ship-fliers.”

That made sense. They sometimes shot down debris to keep us from getting acclivity rings. How worried must they be about us capturing this thing, with hundreds of them?

“Also, it looks a little like a mushroom,” M-Bot added.

Another pair of DDF fighters—perhaps the same ones we’d seen before—bolted past, tailed by a large group of Krell.

“Hey,” Nedd said. “Spin and Quirk, you two get out. You’re almost there. I need to do something.”

“What?” I said, turning to look over my shoulder. “Nedder?”

He broke off from our flight pattern, giving chase to the Krell ships that had passed us. What did he think he was doing?

I turned and followed. “Nedder? Scud.”

“Spin?” Kimmalyn said.

“We’re not leaving him. Come on.”

We raced after Nedd, who was tailing the six Krell ships. They—in turn—were flying after two Sigo-class fighters painted blue, indicating they were from Nightstorm Flight. Nedd clearly intended to help, but one cadet against *six* Krell?

“Nedd!” I said, “I’m all for fighting—you know that—but we also need to follow orders.”

He didn’t respond. Ahead, the two Nightstorms—overwhelmed by the enemy fire—did something desperate. They flew up close to the large shipyard, then curved around and flew *into* a hole in its side. A gaping blackness, perhaps where another section of the shipyard had once been attached.

The whole structure was still falling, but very slowly. Eventually it would crash down—and I doubted we wanted to be anywhere nearby when it did. I watched as the Krell ships pursued our pilots into the depths of the ancient ship, and Nedd barreled after them. So I gritted my teeth and followed.

“Spin,” Kimmalyn said. “I don’t think I can do that. If I try to fly in there, I *swear* I’ll crash.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “Go join Jorgen and the others.”

“All right,” she said. She zipped off to the left, flying out from underneath the shadow of the falling machine.

I, instead, dove into the breach, chasing into the darkness after Nedd.

## 26

I hurtled through the innards of the ancient station—a large open blackness, rimmed by cranes and other construction equipment, lit by flickering emergency floodlights. The writing on one wall, in a circular pattern, reminded me of some of the old equipment down in the caverns—like the strange room I had often passed where the ceiling and floor had been covered in this writing. I could only assume the old occupants of this planet had constructed ships in here—but why had they needed so much space? Our starfighters were swallowed by the cavernous chamber.

The two DDF fighters soared upward, chased by the six Krell, who fired liberally, spraying destructor blasts through the darkness. Nedd tried to catch up, and I tailed him—hitting my over-burn for a moment of extra acceleration.

I couldn't call the other fighters. Cadet ships weren't normally equipped with radio channels to call full pilots. They didn't want us interfering.

I switched to Nedd's direct channel. "This is insane," I said. "Thank you so much for giving me an excuse to try it."

"Spin?" he said. "You're still with me?"

"So far. What's the plan?"

"Help those fighters somehow. Maybe we can get close? Those Krell are flying in a—" He cut off as he buzzed past an old crane, nearly clipping it. "They're flying in a group. We could hit them all at once, with a well-placed IMP."

"I'll follow your lead," I said, dodging underneath the crane. "But if Jerkface asks, I'm *totally* going to claim I tried to talk you out of this."

"You? As the voice of reason? Spin, I'm an idiot, and even *I* wouldn't believe that."

I grinned, then joined Nedd in accelerating to Mag-1.2, trying to catch up to the Krell. Unfortunately, the DDF pilots broke to the right—straight into a tunnel leading farther into the depths of the old station.

A part of me couldn't believe we were doing this. Flying through the center of an ancient piece of debris *while it was in the middle of plummeting toward the ground?* How long did we have until the thing crashed? Minutes at most?

I gritted my teeth, letting up on the throttle as Nedd and I banked, then chased the Krell into the tunnel. Red lights lined the tunnel, and they flashed in a blur as we zipped through at Mag-1.2, already a dangerous speed for what amounted to indoors. I didn't dare go faster, but a quick glance at my proximity sensor indicated the Krell were still well outside IMP range.

Nedd unloaded with his destructor, and I followed his lead—but as Cobb had warned, aiming was difficult, even with six targets swarming in front of us. The Krell shields easily absorbed the few shots that connected.

Far ahead, our fellow pilots speared the wall with light-lances and cornered into another tunnel. The Krell followed, less adroit. I speared the wall with my own lance, then pulled myself into a tight curve to follow. My GravCaps flashed, absorbing the g-forces and keeping me from getting flattened.

I gave them a workout as we wound through the innards of the ship, taking turn after turn—moving through such a frantic, tight sequence, I didn't fire a single shot. My attention was totally consumed by watching the Krell thrusters—using their motions as a guidepost for where to place my next light-lance. Turn, release, dodge, lance, turn. Repeat.

"Just . . . a little . . . closer . . .," Nedd said from right ahead of me.

Lance. Turn. Release.

"I've got an updated battle projection," M-Bot said happily.

Ahead, a Krell ship missed its turn, clipping the side of the tunnel wall. The shield absorbed the impact, but the rebound sent the ship slamming into the opposite wall. The sudden, violent explosion made me back off on my speed. I made my turn, barely, debris and sparks crackling off my ship's shield.

"You forgot I was here, didn't you?" M-Bot said.

"Busy," I said through gritted teeth. Nedd hadn't slowed at the explosion—in fact, he was overburning, closing in on Mag-1.5, trying to get closer to

the remaining Krell.

I sped up to keep pace with him, but this was starting to feel like too much. Even for me.

“I could just go back into hibernation, if you’re not interested in talking,” M-Bot noted. “You’d, um, miss me, if I did that, right?”

“Sure.”

“Ah, you humans are so sentimental! Hahaha. By the way, you have precisely three and a half minutes until this station hits the surface. Maybe less than that, as the Krell have begun firing upon it.”

“What?”

“Now that the bulk of your ships have retreated, the Krell are focusing on the station, trying to keep it out of your hands. I believe some bombers are preparing explosive charges on the top, and ordinary fighters outside are destroying all the acclivity rings to drop it faster.”

“Scud. We could probably build several *flights*’ worth of ships with the salvage from this place.” The Krell weren’t going to let that happen.

But why allow this thing to fall in the first place? Why not destroy it up above?

Trying to figure out Krell motivations now was a waste of time. I pulled into another turn after Nedd. I could barely make out the enemy; they were losing us.

Far ahead, the bright orange flash of an explosion lit the tunnels. One of the ships we were trying to protect had just been destroyed.

“Nedd!” I shouted into the comm. “This place is coming down. We have to get out!”

“No. I have to help!”

I took aim, then—gritting my teeth—risked spearing him with my light-lance. The glowing red line of light stuck to him and made his shield crackle. I cut my booster, then spun my ship on its acclivity ring and boosted the other direction, pulling him backward, slowing his ship.

“Let go of me!” he shouted.

“Nedd . . . We can’t help. We’re not good enough for this sort of thing yet. Stars above, it’s a wonder we survived that run through the tunnels.”

“But . . . But . . .”

We hovered there, burners pulling us opposite directions, connected by a cord of light.

“Coward,” he whispered.



The word hit me like a slap to the face. I wasn't—I couldn't be—  
*Coward.*

"I'm cutting my booster," he said. "Step yours down, or we'll end up careening into that wall."

I bit off a response to him, then lowered my thrust before cutting the light-lance. We fell still, but somewhere distant, the entire structure groaned and shook.

"Which way?" he asked. "Where do we go?"

"I don't know."

M-Bot made a throat-clearing noise. "Would you like instructions on how to escape the flaming death trap that you've inconveniently found yourself \_\_\_\_"

"Yes!" I snapped.

"No need to get prickly. Fly ahead until I tell you, then take a left."

"Follow me!" I said to Nedd, slamming the throttle forward and leaping into motion. I tore through the tunnels, the flare of my booster reflecting off the abandoned metal walls. Nedd followed.

"Left, down that tunnel just ahead," M-Bot noted. "Great. Now go two tunnels—no, not that one—there. Take that one."

I used my light-lance to turn sharply into the tunnel.

"You have slightly under two minutes until you die a fiery death and *I'm* left with only Rig and the slug. I haven't been able to compute which of those two is the less engaging conversationalist. Take that tunnel above you."

I followed his instructions, curving through the maddening complex of turns and tunnels. The sounds outside grew louder. Wrenching steel. Shaking. Hollow explosions.

Sweat soaked the sides of my helmet. I gave my entire attention to the flying, absorbed. Dedicated. *Focused.*

Though I never lost control of my flying, a part of me started to feel disconnected. The insides of my helmet began to grow hot, and I could swear that I could *hear voices* inside my head. Just fragments of words.

... *detonate* ...

... *turn* ...

... *booster* ...

Nedd and I burst back into that cavernous opening at the outer rim of the shipyard. My focus faded into relief, and I didn't need M-Bot's instructions

to turn straight for the glowing gap in the wall.

Nedd and I darted out of the hole and nearly plowed right into the ground. The shipyard had almost hit the surface.

I pulled up and skimmed the blue-grey surface, kicking up dust behind me. Nedd cursed softly. We'd entered a narrow, shrinking gap of space between station and ground.

"The Krell have just detonated several large explosives on the top of the shipyard," M-Bot said.

I bolted forward under the shipyard. The steel ceiling overhead lowered, chunks of metal breaking off and warping around us as the thing's structural integrity collapsed.

"At current velocity, you will not escape the blast wave," M-Bot said softly.

"Overburn, Nedd!" I shouted, slamming my throttle all the way forward. "Mag-10!" The GravCaps kicked in, but quickly overloaded, and a moment later I was smashed backward in my seat.

My face grew heavy, the skin pulling back from my eyes and around my mouth. My arms felt leaden and tried to slip away from the controls.

Ahead, the way out—freedom—was an ever-shrinking line of light.

My Poco started to rattle as I hit Mag-10, then continued, pushing to Mag-10.5. The vibration got worse, and my shield grew bright from the sudden heat of wind resistance.

Blessedly, it was enough. Nedd and I exploded out from underneath the shipyard as it crashed down, spraying dust and debris after us. But at these speeds, we quickly outran that—and outran the sound of the crash, since we were going several times the speed of sound.

I breathed out, decelerating carefully, the rattling subsiding.

Nedd on my wing, we swooped around—and in those seconds of flight after escaping, we'd gotten far enough away that I couldn't even see the dust of the crashing shipyard. My sensors barely registered the shock wave when it finally hit us on our way to rendezvous with the others.

Eventually, we did get close enough that I could make out the enormous dust cloud the crash had caused. The wreckage itself was just a big dark shadow in the dust, swarming with smaller specks above. Krell ships, making sure nothing useful could be salvaged from the enormous wreck. Acclivity stone could often be recovered from the core of fallen debris, but

concentrated destructor fire—or the intense heat from the right kind of an explosion—would ruin it.

“Finally,” Jorgen said as we fell in with the flight. “What in the stars were you two thinking?”

I didn’t respond, instead doing a count of our team. Seven ships, including mine. We’d all made it. We were sweaty, rattled, and solemn—almost nobody said anything as we met up with Riptide Flight for the return to base. But we were alive.

*Coward.*

Nedd’s voice echoed inside my brain, more distracting than the heat from the sensors in my helmet, or the surreal place my thoughts had gone as we flew out. Had I really thought I’d heard voices?

I *wasn’t* a coward. Sometimes you *had* to retreat. The entire DDF had pulled back from this fight. I wasn’t less of a soldier because I had convinced Nedd to escape. Right?

It was growing dark by the time we landed at the launchpad. I stripped off my helmet and climbed from the cockpit, exhausted. Jorgen met me at the bottom of the ladder.

“You still haven’t answered me,” he snapped. “I left you alone during the flight back, as I’m sure you’re rattled, but you *are* going to explain yourself.” He grabbed me by the arm and held on to it tightly. “You nearly got Nedd killed with that stunt.”

I sighed, then looked at his hand.

He carefully let go. “The question remains,” he said. “That was crazy, even for you. I can’t believe you’d—”

“As much as I like being the crazy one, Jerkface, I’m too tired to listen to you right now.” I nodded toward Nedd’s ship in the dim light. “He flew in. I followed. You’d rather I let him go alone?”

“Nedd?” Jorgen said. “He’s too levelheaded for something like that.”

“Maybe the rest of us are getting to him. All I know is there were a couple of Sigos from Nightstorm Flight who picked up some enemy tails, and Nedd would *not* let go.”

“Nightstorm Flight?” Jorgen asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

Jorgen fell silent, then turned and walked toward Nedd’s ship. I followed, feeling wrung out, my head starting to ache in a strange way—like needles behind my eyes. Nedd’s ship was empty, and he wasn’t with the others, who

were gathering at the rooms near the launchpad to change out of their pressure suits. They were laughing together now that the stress of the battle had faded.

Jorgen took off down the path between launchpads, and I followed, confused, until we reached a line of seven Sigo-class starfighters branded with the Nightstorm Flight logo. They'd gotten back before us, and their pilots had already gone, leaving the ships to the maintenance crews.

Nedd knelt on the pavement near two empty spots in the line of ships.

"What?" I asked Jorgen.

"His brothers, Spin. They're wingmates, Nightstorm Six and Seven."

The pilots we'd been following. The ones who, it now became obvious, had both died in those dark tunnels.

Nedd didn't come to class the next day.

Or the day after that. Or all that week.

Cobb kept us busy running chase exercises. We swooped, dodged, and tagged one another, like real pilots.

But in the moments between the action, Nedd's voice haunted me.

*Coward.*

I thought about it again as I sat in my classroom mockpit, running through exercises. I'd broken off the chase and had forced Nedd to abandon his brothers. Was that something any hero of legend would *ever* have done?

"Statistical projections indicate that if you'd remained in your pursuit for another seven seconds," M-Bot said as I ran through a holographic dogfighting exercise, "you'd have died in the crash-down or subsequent explosion."

"Could you have broken into the radio channel?" I said to him, whispering because we were in the classroom. "And called Nedd's brothers?"

"Yes, I probably could have."

"We should have thought of that. Maybe if we'd coordinated, we could have helped them escape."

"And how would you have explained your sudden ability to hack DDF communications signals?"

I dove in my chase of the holographic Krell, and didn't reply. If I'd been a true patriot, I'd have long ago turned the ship over to my superiors. But I wasn't a patriot. The DDF had betrayed and killed my father, then lied about it. I hated them for that . . . but hate them or not, I'd still come begging to them to let me fly.

Suddenly, that seemed to be another act of cowardice.

I growled softly, using my light-lance to spin around a chunk of hovering debris, then slamming my overburn. I darted past the Krell ship and hit my IMP, killing both of our shields, then rotated on my axis. That pointed my nose backward while I was still flying forward—but I managed to spray destructors at the Krell behind me, destroying it.

That was a dangerous maneuver on my part, as it oriented me the wrong way for watching where I was going. Indeed, another Krell ship immediately swooped in on my right flank and fired on me. I died with my “shield down” klaxon blaring in my ear.

“Pretty stunt,” Cobb said in my ear as my hologram reset. “Great way to die.”

I unbuckled and stood up, tearing off my helmet and tossing it aside. It bounced off my seat and clattered against the floor as I walked to the back of the room and started to pace.

Cobb stood in the center of the circle of imitation cockpits, little holographic ships spinning around him. He wore an earpiece to speak with us over our helmet lines. He eyed me as I paced, but he let me be.

“Scud, Quirk!” he yelled at Kimmalyne instead. “That fighter was obviously going through an S-4 sequence, trying to bait you! Pay attention, girl!”

“Sorry!” she exclaimed from inside her cockpit. “Oh, and sorry about that too!”

“Sir?” Arturo asked, shrouded in his training hologram. “The Krell do that a lot, don’t they? Lead us along?”

“Hard to say,” Cobb said with a grunt.

I continued to pace, working out my frustration—mostly at myself—as I listened. Though they were seated in the circle, their voices were muffled by their helmets and the mockpit enclosures. Hearing it all reassured me that when I whispered to M-Bot in my mockpit, the others wouldn’t overhear, so long as I remembered to be very soft.

Their flight chitchat was calming to me. I slowly stopped my pacing, stepping up to join Cobb near the central hologram.

“The other day,” Arturo continued, “with that big chunk of space debris. Their attack wasn’t to defeat us, but to destroy it—and presumably keep us from salvaging it. Right?”

“Yes,” Cobb said. “What’s your point, Amphi?”

“Just that, sir, they must have known it was going to fall. They live out there, in space. And so they probably saw that chunk up there, all those years. They could have destroyed it at any time, but they waited until it fell. Why?”

I nodded. I’d wondered the very same thing.

“Krell motives are unknowable,” Cobb said. “Other than their desire to exterminate us, of course.”

“Why have they never attacked with more than a hundred ships at once?” Arturo continued. “Why do they continue to bait us into skirmishes, instead of sending in one overwhelming attack?”

“Why do they let salvage fall in the first place?” I added. “Without it, we wouldn’t be able to get enough acclivity rings to keep up a resistance. Why don’t *we* attack them in the rubble belt? Why wait for them to come down here and—”

“Enough training,” Cobb said, walking over to his desk and hitting the button that disengaged all of the holograms.

“Sorry, sir,” I said.

“Don’t apologize, cadet,” Cobb said. “You either, Amphisbaena. You both ask good questions. Everyone, helmets off. Sit up. Pay attention. Considering how long it’s been, we’ve learned frighteningly little about the Krell—but I’ll tell you what we *do* know.”

I felt myself growing eager as the others removed their helmets. Answers? Finally?

“Sir,” Jorgen said, standing up. “Aren’t Krell details classified, only available to full pilots?”

Arturo groaned softly and rolled his eyes. His expression seemed to read: *Thank you, Jorgen, for never being any fun whatsoever.*

“Nobody likes a tattler, Jorgen,” Cobb said. “Shut up and listen. You need to know this. You *deserve* to know this. Being a First Citizen gives me some leeway on what I can say.”

I stepped back beside my mockpit as Cobb called up something with his hologram: a planet. Detritus? It did have chunks of metal floating around it, but the rubble belt extended farther—and was thicker—than I’d expected.

“This,” he said, “is an approximation of our planet and the rubble belt. Truth is, we have only a rough idea what’s up there. We lost a lot of whatever we did know when the Krell bombed the archive and our command staff back in LD-zero. But some of our scientists think that at one

time, a shell surrounded the *entire planet*. like a metal shield. Problem is, a lot of those old mechanisms up there are still active—and they have guns.”

He watched the holographic planet—which glowed softly blue and was transparent—launch a group of holographic fighters. They got close to the rubble belt, and were shot down by hundreds of destructors.

“It’s dangerous up there,” Cobb continued. “Even for the Krell. That’s why the old fleet came here, to this old graveyard of a planet. What little the old people remember indicates that Detritus was known, but avoided, back in the day. Its shielding severely interfered with communications, and when facing the old orbital defense platforms, our fleet barely made it through to crash on the surface.

“The Krell don’t seem to explore much out there. They might have known that old shipyard was going to fall, but getting to it through the rubble belt would have been costly. They seem to have found a few safe pathways to the planet, and they use those almost exclusively.”

“So . . .,” I said, fascinated. This was all new to me. “Could we use those old defense platforms somehow?”

“We’ve tried,” Cobb said. “But it’s dangerous for us to fly up there as well—the platforms will fire on us too. Also, the Krell are more deadly up in space. Remember the way this planet is shielded? Well, the Krell have strange advanced communications abilities. The planet’s shielding interferes with their capacity to talk to each other; we think that’s why they fly worse down here.

“There’s another issue, smaller,” Cobb said, seeming to grow hesitant about something. “In space, beyond the planet, the Krell can . . . well, the old crews say that Krell technology lets them read what humans are thinking. And that some people are more susceptible to this than others.”

I shared looks with the rest of the flight. I’d never heard anything like that before.

“Don’t tell anyone I told you that part though,” Cobb said.

“So . . .,” Arturo said. “This communication interference, and those orbital defenses, are why the Krell don’t bombard us from space?”

“In the early days of Alta,” Cobb said, “they tried to bring in some larger ships, but those got destroyed by orbital defenses. The Krell can only get small, maneuverable ships through to attack us.”

“That doesn’t explain why they send relatively small flights,” Arturo said. “Unless I’m wrong, they’ve never sent an assault larger than a hundred



ships. Right?”

Cobb nodded.

“Why not send two hundred? Three hundred?”

“We don’t know. Dig into the classified reports, and you’ll find nothing more than wild theories. Perhaps a hundred ships is the most they can coordinate at once.”

“Okay,” Arturo said, “but why do they seem to only be able to prepare a single lifebuster at a time? Why not load every ship with one, and suicide them into us? Why—”

“What *are* they?” I interrupted. Arturo had good questions—but in my opinion, less important than that.

Arturo glanced at me, then nodded.

“Do we know, Cobb?” I asked. “In those secret files, does somebody know? Have we ever *seen* a Krell?”

Cobb changed the hologram to a hovering image of a burned-out helmet and some pieces of armor. I shivered. Krell remains. His hologram was a much more detailed, much more *real* version of the artistic renditions I’d seen. The photo showed a few scientists standing at a table around the armor, which was squat and bulky. Kind of squarish.

“This is all we’ve ever been able to recover,” Cobb said. “And we only find it in occasional ships we shoot down. One in a hundred or fewer. They aren’t human, of that we’re sure.” He showed another image, a closer-up hologram of one of the helmets, burned out from a crash.

“There are theories,” Cobb continued. “The old people, who lived on the *Defiant* itself, talk of things impossible to our current understanding. Maybe the reason we never find anything but armor is because there isn’t anything else to find. Maybe the Krell *are* the armor. In the old days, there were legends of something strange. Machines that can think.”

Machines that can think.

Machines with advanced communications technology.

I suddenly felt cold. The room seemed to fade, and I stood there beside my mockpit, hearing the others talk as if from far away.

“That’s crazy,” Hurl said. “A piece of metal can’t think, any more than a rock can. Or that door. Or my canteen.”

“More crazy than the idea that they can read minds?” Arturo asked. “I’ve never heard anything like that.”

“There are obviously wonders in this galaxy that we can barely comprehend,” Cobb said. “After all, the *Defiant* and other ships could travel between stars in the blink of an eye. Thinking machines would explain why so many Krell cockpits we investigate are empty, and why the ‘armor’ we recover never seems to have any bodies in it.”

*Machines that can think.*

Cobb called the end of the day then, and we all gathered our things to leave for dinner. Kimmalyn and FM both complained that they had a cold—one had been going around—so Cobb suggested they go back to their room and rest. He said he’d have an aide send dinner to their bunks.

I heard all of this, but didn’t really. Instead, I sat down in a daze. M-Bot. A ship that could think, and could infiltrate our communications with apparent ease. What if . . . what if I was repairing a Krell? Why hadn’t I ever bothered to *think* about that? How could I be so blind to what seemed like an obvious possibility?

*He has a cockpit. I thought, with English writing. Facilities for a pilot. And he says he can’t fly the ship himself.*

But that could be a ruse, right? He said he couldn’t lie, but I had only his word on that. I . . .

“Spin?” Cobb asked, stopping near my mockpit. “You aren’t catching that cold too, are you?”

I shook my head. “This is just a lot to take in.”

Cobb grunted. “Well, maybe it’s a load of cold slag. Truth is, once we lost the archive, most everything about the old days became hearsay.”

“Do you mind if we tell Nedd about this?” I asked him. “When he gets back?”

“He’s not coming back,” Cobb said. “The admiral officially removed him from the cadet rolls this morning.”

“What?” I said, standing up, surprised. “Did he ask to be removed?”

“He didn’t report for duty, Spin.”

“But . . . his brothers . . .”

“Being unable to control your emotions, grief included, is a sign that one is unfit for duty. At least that’s how Ironsides and the other DDF brass see it. I say it’s a good thing Nedd is out. That boy was too smart for all this anyway . . .” He hobbled out the door.

I sank back down into my seat. So we really were just six now. And if being unable to control emotions made one unfit for duty . . . what about

me? It was all piling on top of me. The loss of friends, the worry about M-Bot, the voices that whispered deep down inside that I was in fact a coward.

All my life, I'd fought with a chip on my shoulder, thundering that I *would* be a pilot and I *would* be good enough. Where was that confidence now?

I'd always assumed that when I made it—when I finally got here—I'd stop feeling so alone.

I dug in my pack and raised my radio. "M-Bot, are you there?"

"Acclivity ring: functional, but lacking power. Boosters: nonfunctional. Cytonic hyperdrive: nonfunctional." He paused. "That's a yes, in case you were confused. I'm here, because I can't go anywhere."

"Were you listening in on our conversation?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And I admit, I was running some calculations on the likelihood of mushrooms growing inside that building, as your conversation was—typical of humans—slightly boring. But not completely! So you should feel—"

"M-Bot. Are you a Krell?"

"What? No! Of course I'm not a Krell. Why would you think that I am? How could you think . . . Wait, calculating. Oh. You think because I'm an AI, and they're likely AIs, that we must be the same?"

"You have to admit it's suspicious."

"I'd be offended if I could be offended," he said. "Maybe I should start calling you a cow, since you have four limbs, are made of meat, and have *rudimentary* biological mental capacities."

"Would you *know* if you were a Krell?" I asked him. "Maybe you forgot."

"I'd know," he said.

"You've forgotten why you came to Detritus," I pointed out. "You have only one image of your pilot, if that's even really him. You can barely remember anything about my species. Maybe you never knew. Maybe your memory bank is filled only with the bits that the Krell know about us, and you invented this entire story."

"I'm writing a new subroutine now," he said. "To properly express my outrage. It's going to take time to get right. Give me a few minutes."

"M-Bot . . ."

"Just a sec. Patience is a virtue, Spensa."

I sighed, but started packing up my things. I felt hollowed out. Empty. Not afraid, of course. I bathed in fires of destruction and reveled in the screams of the defeated. I didn't get *afraid*.

But maybe, deep down, I was . . . worried. Nedd dropping out had hit me harder than it should have.

I threw my pack on my shoulder and clipped the radio to its side. I set it to flash a light if M-Bot or someone else tried to contact me. I didn't want him talking out of it while I walked the hallways, though I needn't have worried. The building was empty; Cobb had dismissed us late, and the other flights had already gone to dinner. I didn't spot any MPs or random support staff as I walked slowly toward the exit, my feet leaden.

I wasn't certain I could keep doing this. Getting up early, working all morning on M-Bot. Getting wrung out by lessons each day, then trudging back to my cave at night. Sleeping fitfully, dreaming of the people I'd failed or—worse—having nightmares about running away . . .

“Pssst!”

I stopped, then glanced at the radio strapped to the side of my backpack.

“Psssssssssssssssssssssssssssssttt! Spensa!”

I looked up and down the hallway. To my right—was that *Kimmalyn* there, in a doorway, wearing black? “Quirk?”

She waved me forward urgently. I frowned, suspicious.

Then I wanted to kick myself. *Idiot. This is Kimmalyn.*

I walked to her. “What are you—”

“Shhh!” she said, then scrambled down the hallway and peeked around a corner. She waved at me to follow, and more confused than anything else, I did.

This continued for a couple of turns through empty corridors—we even had to pull into the bathroom and she made me wait with her there, explaining nothing, until we finally reached a hallway lined with doors. The girls' bunks. Two unfamiliar young women—wearing flight suits and the patch of Stardragon Flight—stood chatting outside one of the rooms.

Kimmalyn held me there, crouching at the corner until the two girls finally walked off in the other direction. I didn't miss that Kimmalyn and I had come in the back way, the opposite direction of the mess hall. So was she sick, or not?

After the two girls left, FM's head—her short hair clipped back with a glittering barrette—popped out of one of the doors. She gestured with an

urgent wave. Kimmalyn dashed down the hall to her, and I followed, ducking into their room.

FM slammed the door, then grinned. Their small room was as I remembered it, though one of the beds had been removed, when Morningtide died. That left a bunk on the left wall, and a single bed by the right. A pile of blankets lay lumped between them, and the dresser held two trays of food: steaming soup in bowls, with algae tofu and slices of thick bread. Real bread. With real imitation butter.

My mouth started watering.

“We asked for extra,” Kimmalyn said, “but they sent soup, because they think we’re sick. Still, ‘You can’t ask for more when you already have it,’ as the Saint said.”

“They removed the extra bed,” FM said, “so we piled some blankets on the floor. The trick is going to be using the lavatories—but we’ll run interference for you.”

It finally sank in. They’d *pretended* to be sick so they could order food into the room—and share it. They’d snuck me to the room, and made a “bed” for me.

Stars. Gratitude surged up inside me.

I was going to cry.

Warriors did *not* cry.

“Oh! You look angry,” Kimmalyn said. “Don’t be angry. We’re not implying you’re too weak to walk to your cave! We just thought . . . you know . . .”

“It would be nice to take a break,” FM said. “Even a great warrior can take the occasional break, right, Spin?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“Great!” Kimmalyn said. “Let’s dig in. Subterfuge makes me *famished*.”

That soup tasted better than the blood of my enemies.

Considering I'd never actually *tasted* the blood of my enemies, perhaps that didn't do justice to the soup.

It tasted better than soup should. It tasted of laughter, and love, and appreciation. The warmth of it glowed inside me like ignited rocket fuel. I snuggled in the blankets, holding the big bowl in my lap, while Kimmalyn and FM chatted.

I fought down the tears. I *would not* cry.

But the soup tasted of home. Somehow.

"I told you the costume would make her come with me," Kimmalyn was saying as she sat on her bed, cross-legged. "Black is the color of *intrigue*."

"You're insane," FM said, wagging her spoon. "You're lucky nobody saw you. Defiants are all too eager to look for a reason to be offended."

"You're Defiant too, FM," I said. "You were born here, like the rest of us. You're a citizen of the United Defiant Caverns. Why do you keep pretending you're something different?"

FM grinned in an eager way. It seemed that she *liked* that sort of question. "Being a Defiant," she said, "isn't just about our nationality. It's always expressed as a mindset. 'A true Defiant will think this way' or 'To be Defiant, you need to never back down,' things like that. So, by their own logic, I can un-Defiant myself through personal choices."

"And . . . you want to?" I said, cocking my head.

Kimmalyn handed me another slice of bread. "She thinks you all might be a touch . . . bellicose."

"There's that word again," I said. "Who talks like that?"

"People who are erudite," Kimmalyn said, sipping her soup.

“I refuse to be trapped by bonds of autocracy and nationalism,” FM said. “To survive, our people have become necessarily hardened, but alongside it we have enslaved ourselves. Most people never question, and doggedly go through the motions of an obedient life. Others have increased aggression to the point that it’s hard to have natural feelings!”

“I have natural feelings,” I said. “And I’ll fight anyone who says otherwise.”

FM eyed me.

“I’d insist on swords at dawn,” I said, eating the bread. “But I’ll probably be too full of bread to get up. Is this seriously what you all get to eat *every day*?”

“Well, what do you eat, dear?” Kimmalyyn said.

“Rats,” I said. “And mushrooms.”

“Every day?”

“I used to put pepper on the rats, but I ran out.”

The two of them shared a look.

“It’s an embarrassment to the DDF, what the admiral has done to you,” FM said. “But it’s a natural outgrowth of the totalitarian need for absolute power over those who resist her—the very *example* of the hypocrisy of the system. Defiance is not ‘Defiant’ to them unless it doesn’t actually defy anything.”

I shot a glance at Kimmalyyn, who shrugged. “She’s extremely passionate about this.”

“We are propping up a government that has overreached its bounds in the name of public safety,” FM said. “The people must speak up and rise against the upper class who holds them enslaved!”

“Upper class, like you?” I asked.

FM looked down at her soup, then sighed. “I’d go to the Disputer meetings, and my parents would just pat me on the head and explain to everyone else that I was going through a counterculture phase. Then they signed me up for flight school, and . . . well, I mean, I get to *fly*.”

I nodded. That part I understood.

“I figure, if I become a famous pilot, I can speak for the little guys, you know? I’m more likely to be able to change things here than down in the deep caverns, wearing ball gowns and sitting primly next to my sisters. Right? Don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I said. “That makes perfect sense. Right, Quirk?”

“I keep telling her that,” Kimmalyn said to me, “but I think it will mean more from you.”

“Why me?” I asked. “FM, didn’t you say people like me have unnatural emotions?”

“Yes, but you can’t help being a product of your environment!” FM said. “It’s not *your* fault you’re a bloodthirsty ball of aggression and destruction.”

“I am?” I perked up. “Like, that’s how you see me?”

She nodded.

Awesome.

The door to the little room suddenly opened, and by instinct I hefted the bowl, figuring that the still-warm soup might make a good diversion if flung in someone’s face.

Hurl slipped in, her lean form silhouetted by the hallway’s light. Scud. I hadn’t even *thought* about her. The other two had brought me in while she was away at dinner. Had they cleared this little infraction with her?

She met my eyes, then hurriedly shut the door. “I brought desserts,” she said, lifting a small bundle wrapped in a napkin. “Jerkface caught me taking them as he stopped by. I think he just does that to glare at us before he goes off to be with more important people for dinner.”

“What did you tell him?” Kimmalyn said.

“I said I wanted a midnight snack. Hopefully he doesn’t suspect anything. The hallway looked clear, no MPs or anything. I think we’re good.” She unwrapped the napkin, revealing some chocolate cake that was only mildly squashed by the transportation.

I watched her, thoughtful, as she gave us each a piece, then flopped onto her bed, stuffing the last chunk into her mouth in one go. This was a girl who had barely spoken to me over the last few weeks. Now she brought me cake? I was certainly relieved that she wasn’t going to turn me in, but I didn’t know what to make of her otherwise.

I settled back down in my blankets, then tried the cake.

It was so, *so* much better than rat. I couldn’t help but let out a little groan of delight, at which Kimmalyn grinned. She sat on the side of Hurl’s bed, which hadn’t been made in the morning. Kimmalyn’s bed was the neatly made top bunk above, with the immaculate corners and the frilled pillowcase. FM’s was on the other side, with the stack of books on the shelf near the headboard.

“So . . .,” I said, licking my fingers, “what do you guys do all night?”



“Sleep?” Hurl asked.

“For twelve hours?”

“Well, there’s PT,” FM said. “We do laps in the pool usually, though Hurl prefers the weights. And target practice with sidearms, or extra time in the centrifuge . . .”

“I still haven’t thrown up in that,” Hurl said, “which is, in my opinion, completely inappropriate.”

“Hurl taught us wall-ball,” Kimmalyln said. “It’s fun to watch her play the boys. They always take it as an invigorating challenge.”

“By which she means it’s satisfying to watch Nedd lose,” FM said. “He seems so befuddled every time . . .” She trailed off, perhaps realizing that they’d never get to see him play again.

My stomach twisted. Swimming. Target practice. Sports? I’d known what I was missing, but hearing it like that . . .

“We won’t be expected to do any of that tonight,” Kimmalyln said. “Since we’re sick. It will be fun, Spin! We can stay up all night talking.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Normal things,” FM said, shrugging.

What was normal? “Like . . . guys?”

“Stars, no,” Hurl said, sitting up and pulling something off her headboard. She held up a sketchbook filled with little drawings of ships going through patterns. “Flight strategies!”

“Hurl keeps trying to name new moves after herself,” FM noted. “But we figure the ‘Hurl maneuver’ really ought to have several loops in it or something. Like the one [here](#).”

“I hate loops,” Hurl said. “We should call that the Quirk maneuver. It’s flowery.”

“Don’t be silly,” Kimmalyln said. “I’d somehow end up crashing into *myself* if I had to do that many loops.”

“A Quirk maneuver would involve complimenting the enemy while you shoot them,” FM said, grinning. “‘Oh! You make lovely sparks when you die! You should feel very proud of yourself. Good job!’”

My tension bled away as the girls showed off the maneuvers they’d designed. The names were consistently terrible, but the chatter was fun, engaging, and . . . well, just so very *welcome*. I took a turn sketching an obscenely complex maneuver into the book, something between an Ahlstrom loop and a double switchback with a sidewind.

“Crazy thing is,” FM said, “she could probably pull that off.”

“Yeah,” Kimmaly said. “Maybe we could rename *taking off* the Quirk maneuver. That’s the only thing I can manage consistently.”

“You’re not nearly as bad as that,” Hurl said to her.

“I’m the worst pilot in the flight.”

“And the best shot.”

“Which matters zero if I die before I can fire back.”

I grunted, hand still on Hurl’s notebook. I turned to another page. “Quirk is a great sniper, and Hurl, you’re excellent at chasing down Krell ships. FM, you’re excellent at dodging.”

“I can barely hit the broad side of a mountain though,” FM said. “I guess if you somehow mashed us all together, you’d have one good pilot.”

“Couldn’t we try something like that?” I said, sketching. “Cobb says that the Krell are always on the lookout for pilots who distinguish themselves. He says that if they find someone they think might be flightleader, they concentrate all fire on that person.”

“Yeah?” Hurl said, sitting up on her bed. “What are you saying?”

“Well, if they really are machines, maybe they’ve got this mandate to hunt down our leaders. Maybe it’s stuck in their machine brains, to the point that they follow that command to ridiculous ends.”

“That seems like a stretch,” FM said.

I glanced at my pack, and the portable radio on the side. The light was flashing. M-Bot had tried to call me, probably with another request for mushrooms.

“Look,” I said, returning to my sketch. “What if we *encouraged* the Krell to focus on specific members of our flight? If they concentrated fire on FM, who is best at dodging, they might leave the others alone. Quirk could set up and pick them off. Hurl could hang back, and then chase after any who decided to try to bring down our gunner.”

The others leaned in close. Hurl nodded, though FM shook her head. “I’m not sure I could survive that, Spin. I would end up with *dozens* of tails. I’d be shot down for sure. But . . . maybe you could manage it.”

“You’re our best pilot,” Quirk agreed. “And you’re not frightened of *anything*.”

My pen stilled, and I looked at the half-drawn flight plan, with Quirk’s ship sitting at the perimeter sniping down Krell. I’d drawn a dozen ships chasing after a single pilot.

What would it feel like to be in the seat, knowing you had heat from a dozen enemies? Immediately my daydreaming took over, imagining it as an incredible, dramatic fight. Explosions, and excitement, and glory!

But now there was another voice inside me. A quiet, solemn one that whispered, *That's not reality, Spin. In reality, you'd be terrified.*

"I . . ." I licked my lips. "I don't know if I could do it either. I . . ." *Force it out.* "I get scared sometimes."

FM frowned. "So?"

"So some of what I say . . . it's kind of . . . bravado. In reality, I'm not that confident."

"You mean you're *human*?" Kimmalyn said. "Blessed stars. Who would have thought?"

"You sound like you're making some big confession," FM agreed. "'Guys, I have emotions. They're *terrible*.'"

I blushed. "It's a big deal for me. I spent my childhood dreaming of the days when I could fly and fight. Now that I'm here, and I've lost friends, I . . . It hurts. I'm weaker than I thought I was."

"If that makes you weak," FM said, "I must be *useless*."

"Yeah," Kimmalyn said. "You're not crazy, Spin. You're a person."

"Albeit," FM added, "one who has been thoroughly indoctrinated by a soulless system designed only to spit out willing, jingoistic, obedient thralls. No offense."

I couldn't help noticing that Hurl had grown quiet at this conversation. She was lying back on her bed and looking at the bunk above.

"You can admit these things to us," Quirk said. "It's all right. We're a team." She leaned in toward FM and me. "Since we're being honest here . . . can I tell you something? Truth is, I *make up* most of those quotes I say."

I blinked. "Really? Like, the Saint never said all those things?"

"No!" Kimmalyn said in a conspiratorial whisper. "I came up with them myself! I simply don't admit it, because I don't want to appear too wise. It's unseemly."

"My entire world is shaken right now, Quirk," FM said. "I feel like you just told me up is really down, or that Hurl's breath smells great."

"Hey," Hurl said. "See if I get *you* cake again."

"This is serious," I said to the other two. "I *get scared*."

*I might secretly be a coward.*

FM and Kimmalyn blew it off. They reassured me, and talked about how they felt. FM still thought she was a hypocrite for wanting to bring down the DDF while also wanting to fly with it. Kimmalyn had the soul of a smart aleck, but the upbringing of a polite society girl.

I appreciated their kindness, but it occurred to me that the counterculture Disputer and the girl from Bountiful might not be the best people to understand how important it was that I not be afraid. So I let the conversation slide in other directions.

We talked far into the night, and it was . . . well, it was wonderful. Sincere and friendly. But as the night grew long, I found myself strangely anxious. In some ways, this was one of the best days of my life—but it also reaffirmed what I'd always feared. That the others were bonding without me.

My mind scrambled, even as I grinned at something Kimmalyn said. Was there a way to extend this? How often could the girls claim to be sick? When could I come back?

Eventually, biology began to make its demands, so Quirk and FM went to scout out the restroom. That left me with Hurl, who had been dozing off. I didn't want to wake her, so I waited by the door.

"I know how you feel," Hurl suddenly said.

I almost jumped out of my skin. "You're awake?"

She nodded. She didn't even seem drowsy, though I swore I'd heard her snoring softly earlier.

"Fear doesn't make us cowards though, does it?" Hurl asked.

"I don't know," I said, walking over to her bed. "I wish I could just smother it."

Hurl nodded again.

"Thank you," I said, "for letting the other two plan this night for me. I know spending time with me wouldn't have been your first choice."

"I saw what you did for Nedd," she said. "I watched you fly in after him, right into the depths of that chunk of debris."

"I couldn't let him go alone."

"Yeah." She hesitated. "My mother told stories of your father, you know. When she saw me back down on the playground, or flinch from a ball during practice. She told me about the pilot who claimed to be brave, but was a coward inside. 'Don't you dare sully the name of the Defiant people,' she'd say to me. 'Don't you dare become a Chaser . . .'"

I winced.

“But we don’t have to be like that,” Hurl continued. “That’s what I realized. A little fear, a little history, those things don’t mean anything. Only what we *do* means anything.” She looked toward me. “I’m sorry for how I treated you. It was just a . . . shock, when I found out. But you’re not him, and I’m not either, regardless of what I feel sometimes.”

“My father wasn’t a coward, Hurl,” I said. “The DDF lies about him.”

She didn’t look like she believed me, but she nodded anyway. Then she sat up, holding out her fist. “Not cowards. No backing down. Brave until the end, right Spin? A pact.”

I met her fist with mine. “Brave to the end.”

I woke up snuggled into too many blankets, and reached out to feel the side of M-Bot's cockpit—but my hand slapped the side of a bed frame.

*Right.* What time was it? I tapped my light-line to glance at its clock, raising a soft glow in the room. Just before five in the morning. Two hours until we had to be ready for class.

I should have been exhausted, as we'd stayed up talking until after one. Strangely, I felt wide awake. Perhaps my brain knew that if I wanted to use the facilities and get cleansed today, I'd need to do it now—while everyone else in the building was sleeping.

In fact, it was probably best if I snuck out and was seen walking back to the building before class. I climbed out of my nest and stretched, then grabbed my backpack. I tried to be as quiet as possible, though I probably shouldn't have worried. If the others could sleep through Hurl's snoring, my pack scraping the floor wouldn't disturb them.

I slipped open the door, then turned and looked at the three sleeping girls. "Thank you," I whispered. Right then, I decided I wouldn't let them do this again. It was too dangerous; I didn't want to get them on the admiral's bad side.

This had been wondrous. Even if it left me knowing, for sure, what I was missing. Even if I felt sick to have to walk away, even if I twisted inside, I wouldn't have traded this night for anything. My only taste of what it was like to be part of a real flight of pilots.

That thought loomed in my mind as I walked to the bathroom and cleansed. Afterward, looking in the bathroom mirror, I smoothed back my wet hair. In all the stories, the heroes had stark black, golden, or red hair—something dramatic. Not dirty brown.

I sighed, threw my pack on my shoulder, and slipped out into the empty hallway. As I walked to the exit, a light down a corridor caught my attention. I knew that room—it was our classroom. Who would be there at this hour?

My curiosity overcame my common sense. I snuck over to peek in through the window in the door and saw Jorgen's cockpit engaged, the hologram up and running. What was he doing here at 0530? Getting in a little extra practice?

Cobb's hologram in the center of the room projected a miniature version of the training battlefield, so I could watch Jorgen's ship light-lance around a hovering piece of debris, then fire on a Krell. Something about that fight looked familiar . . .

Yes, it was the one where Bim and Morningtide had died. I'd seen Cobb watching this same recording.

Morningtide's ship went down in flames, and I winced—though just before she hit, the hologram froze, then restarted. I watched again, picking out Jorgen's ship as he flew from the other side of the battlefield, dodging debris, making for the ship that would destroy Morningtide. He fired off his IMP, but even as he took down the enemy shield, the Krell blasted Morningtide's ship and sent her spinning downward.

The hologram restarted, and Jorgen tried again, going a different direction this time.

*He's trying to figure out if he could have saved them.* I realized.

When Morningtide went down this third time, the hologram continued—but Jorgen heaved himself out of his seat. He ripped off his helmet and slammed it against the wall with a loud *bang*. I flinched and almost bolted, worried the noise might draw attention. But seeing Jorgen—normally so tall and imperious—slumped against the wall . . . I couldn't walk away.

He looked so vulnerable. So human. Losing Bim and Morningtide had been hard on me. I'd never thought about how it had been for their flightleader—the one who was supposed to keep us all out of trouble.

Jorgen dropped his helmet. He turned away from the wall, then froze.

Scud. He'd seen me.

I ducked away, and was out the exit of the building before he could catch up. But . . . what now? Suddenly, a gaping hole appeared in our little subterfuge. What if the guards at the gate told the admiral that I'd never left last night?

Surely they didn't report to the admiral every day about every person who went in and out of the base. Right? But if I left now, then came right back in, they'd definitely notice something was odd.

So, instead of going to the gate, I aimlessly walked the pathways of the base, between buildings. It was dark out, the skylights dim and the pathways mostly empty. In fact, I passed more statues than I did people: busts of the First Citizens—looking toward the sky—lined this part of the walkway.

A too-cold gust of wind blew across me, shaking the branches of a nearby tree. In the dim light, the statues were haunting figures, their stone eyes lost in shadow. The air smelled of smoke from the nearby launchpads, a pungent scent. A fighter must have returned to base on fire recently.

I sighed and sat down on a bench along the walkway, dropping my pack next to me. I felt . . . melancholy, perhaps a little wistful. The call light on the radio was still blinking. Maybe talking to M-Bot would kick me out of my funk.

I switched it into receiving mode. "Hey, M-Bot."

"I'm outraged!" M-Bot said. "This is an insult beyond insults! I cannot express with words my indignation, but my built-in thesaurus says that I am insulted, affronted, maltreated, desecrated, injured, ravaged, persecuted, and/or possibly molested."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to turn you off."

"Turn me off?"

"I've had the radio off all night. Isn't that what you're angry about?"

"Oh, that's just normal human forgetfulness. But don't you remember? I wrote a subroutine to express that I'm mad at you?"

I frowned, trying to remember what the ship was talking about.

"You said I was a Krell?" he said. "I got mad? It was kind of a big deal?"

"Right. Sorry."

"Apology accepted!" M-Bot answered. He sounded pleased with himself. "I projected a nice sense of outrage, don't you think?"

"It was splendid."

"I thought so."

I sat for a time, silent. Something about last night. It left me feeling reflective, quiet.

*She really isn't ever going to let me fly. I thought, smelling the smoke from the launchpad fire. I can graduate, but it will be meaningless.*



“You’re right though,” M-Bot noted. “I might be a Krell.”

“WHAT?” I said, practically smacking myself with the radio as I raised it to my lips.

“I mean, my data banks *have* mostly been lost,” M-Bot said. “There’s no saying what was in there.”

“Then why did you get so angry at *me* for suggesting you might be a Krell!”

“It seemed the correct thing to do. I’m supposed to simulate having a personality. What person would let themselves be *slandered* like that? Even if it was a completely logical assumption, and you are making a perfectly valid threat assessment by wondering about it.”

“I really don’t know what to make of you, M-Bot.”

“I don’t either. Sometimes, my subroutines engage with responses before my main personality simulator has time to rein them in. It’s very confusing. In a perfectly logical, machine way, not at all irrational like human emotions.”

“Sure.”

“You are using sarcasm. Be careful, or I’ll engage my outrage routine again. But if it helps, I don’t think the Krell are AIs, regardless of what your DDF thinkers have determined.”

“Really? Why do you think that?”

“I’ve analyzed their flight patterns. And yours, by the way. I might have some pointers to help you improve. It seems . . . I have entire subroutines dedicated to that kind of analysis.

“Anyway, I don’t think all of the Krell are AIs, though some might be. My analysis finds that most of their patterns are individual, not complying with easily determined logical routines. At the same time they are reckless, which is curious. I suspect they are drones of some sort, though I will say that Cobb is right: this planet exerts some interference on communications. I appear to have boosting technology that helps me pierce the interference.”

“Well, you *are* a stealth ship. Advanced communications technology probably helped with your missions.”

“Yes. My holographic projectors, active camouflage, and sonar avoidance are probably there for the same reason.”

“I didn’t even know you could do most of those things. Camouflage? Holograms?”

“My settings say I had these systems engaged on standby mode, creating an illusion of rubble over my ship and preventing scans from detecting my cavern, until recently when my backup power ran out. I’d give you the exact time to the nanosecond, but humans generally hate that kind of precision, as it makes me seem calculating and alien.”

“Well, that probably explains why nobody found you all those years.” I tapped the radio, thoughtful.

“Regardless,” M-Bot said, “I hope I’m not a Krell. That would be super embarrassing.”

“You’re no Krell,” I said—and realized I meant it. I’d worried earlier, but now . . . I just couldn’t explain why, but I knew he wasn’t.

“Maybe,” he said. “I’ll admit I’m . . . worried that I might be something evil like that, and not know it.”

“If you were a Krell, why would you have human living space and plugs that work with ours?”

“I could have been built to infiltrate human society by imitating one of your ships,” he said. “Or actually, what if the Krell are all rogue AIs originally created by humans? That would explain why I had your writing on me. Or maybe I—”

“You’re not a Krell,” I said. “I can feel it.”

“That’s probably some irrational human confirmation bias speaking,” he noted. “But my subroutine that can simulate appreciation . . . is appreciative.”

I nodded.

“That’s kind of what it does,” he added. “Appreciate things.”

“I would never have figured.”

“It can appreciate something at a million times per second. So you could say your comment is likely the single most appreciated thing you’ve ever done.”

“*I’d* appreciate you shutting up about how great you are once in a while,” I said, but I smiled and stuck the radio onto my backpack.

“I’m *not* appreciating *that* comment,” he noted softly. “Just so you know.”

I flipped the radio off, then stood up and stretched. A few First Citizen busts seemed to glare at me from nearby. Including a younger Cobb. How strange to look at an image of him now that I knew him so well. He shouldn’t look young. Hadn’t he been born a crusty fifty-year-old man?

I shouldered my pack and wandered back toward the flight school building.

An MP stood right outside the main entrance.

I stopped in place. Then, worried, I approached.

“Cadet Nightshade?” the MP asked. “Callsign: Spin.”

My heart sank.

“Admiral Ironsides would like to speak with you.”

I nodded.

The MP led me to the building where I’d met Jorgen and the admiral that once. As we neared, my sense of resignation grew. Somehow I’d known this was coming. Staying with the girls last night had been a bad idea, but . . . this wasn’t about one little infraction.

It seemed to me, as I stepped into the building, that a confrontation had been growing inevitable. I *deserved* this for what I’d done to Jorgen, twice over. More telling, the admiral was the most powerful person in the DDF, while I was the daughter of a coward. In some ways, it was remarkable she hadn’t found a way to kick me out before this.

It was time for it to end. I was a fighter, yes, but a good fighter knew when a battle was unwinnable.

The MP deposited me inside the admiral’s shockingly messy office. Ironsides was drinking coffee at her desk, looking over some report, her back to me.

“Close the door,” she said.

I obeyed.

“There’s a note here on the security reports at the gate. You didn’t leave last night. Have you made a hidey-hole in one of the maintenance closets or something?”

“Yes,” I said, relieved that at least she didn’t know the others had helped me.

“Have you eaten mess hall food? Stolen by your own hand, or smuggled out for you by one of your flightmates?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

The admiral sipped her coffee, still not looking toward me. I stared at her back, her silvery hair, bracing myself for the words. *You’re out.*

“Don’t you think it’s time to stop this farce?” she said, turning a page. “Drop out now. I’ll let you keep your cadet’s pin.”

I frowned. Why . . . ask? Why not just say the words? She had the power now that I'd broken her rules, didn't she?

Ironsides turned her chair, fixing me with a cold stare. "Nothing to say, cadet?"

"Why do you care so much?" I asked. "I'm only one girl. I'm no threat to you."

The admiral set down her coffee, then stood. She straightened her crisp white uniform jacket, then stepped up to me. Like most people, she towered over me.

"You think this is about my pride, girl?" Ironsides asked. "If I let you continue in the DDF, you'll get good people killed when you inevitably run. So, I offer again. Walk away with the pin. In the city below, it should be enough to secure you any number of jobs, many quite lucrative."

She stared at me, hard. And suddenly it made sense.

She *couldn't* kick me out. Not because she lacked the power, but because . . . she needed me to prove that she was right. She needed me to drop out, give up, because that was what a coward would do.

Her rules weren't about tricking me into an infraction. They were about making my life terrible so that I backed down. If she kicked me out, I could continue the narrative. I could claim my family had been wronged. I could scream about my father's innocence. My treatment would only support my victimhood. Not being able to sleep in the cadet quarters? No food during my training? That would look terrible.

But if I walked away, she won. It was the *only* way she won.

In that moment, I was more powerful than the very admiral in command of the Defiant Defense Force.

So I saluted. "Can I return to my classes now, sir?"

A blush rose to her cheeks. "You're a coward. From a family of cowards."

I held the salute.

"I could destroy you. See you impoverished. You don't want me as an enemy. Reject my kind offer now, and you will never have another chance at it."

I held the salute.

"Bah," the admiral said, turning from me and sitting down hard. She grabbed her coffee and drank, as if I weren't there.

I took it as a dismissal. I turned and let myself out, and the MP, still standing outside the door, let me go.

Nobody came for me as I walked to the classroom. I went straight to my mockpit and sat down, then greeted the others as they arrived. When Cobb hobbled in, I realized I was *excited* for class. It felt as if I'd maybe, finally, escaped the shadow that had been hovering over me since Bim and Morningtide had died.

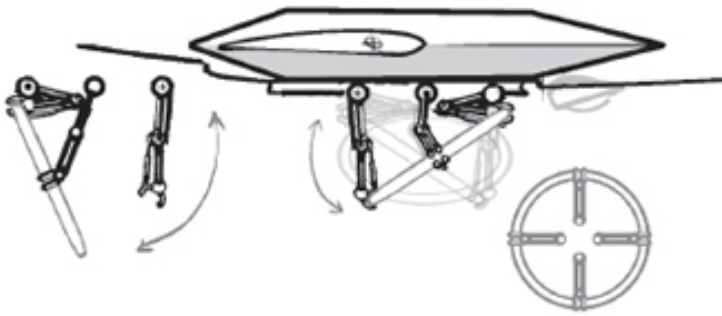
The girls and their kindness were part of that, but my conversation with Ironsides was a bigger part. She'd given me what I needed to keep fighting. She'd invigorated me. In a strange way, she'd brought me back to life.

I would fight. I would find the answers to what had really happened to my father. And Ironsides would *regret* forcing me to do both.

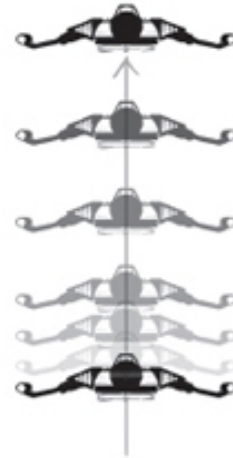
## Standard DDF Ship Features

◦ ≡ ≡ ≡ ▷ Acclivity Ring ◁ ≡ ≡ ≡ ◦

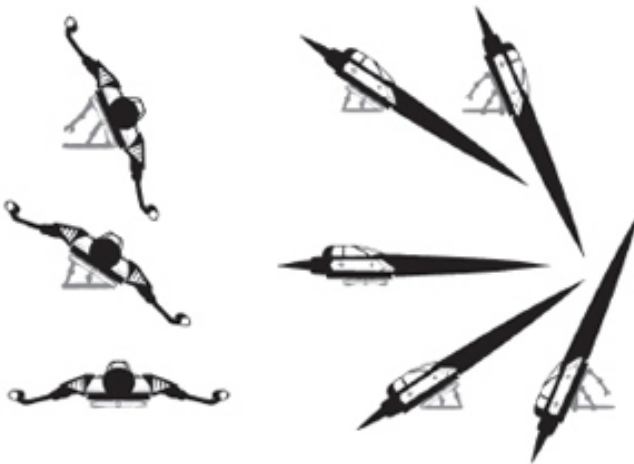
### Range of Rotation



## Vertical Takeoff



## Maneuverability & Attack Angle



## Uncontrolled Descent



◉ ════════ ▷ Light-Lance ◁ ════════ ◉





## PART FOUR



## INTERLUDE

Admiral Judy “Ironsides” Ivans always watched the battle replays. She used the main control room, which had a large holographic projector in the center of the circular floor. She preferred to stand in its center, light shining up across her, the rest of the room dark.

She watched them fight. She watched them die. She forced herself to listen to the audio, if there was any, of each pilot’s last words.

She tried to read the enemy’s goals in the pattern of red and blue ships—red for the DDF, blue for the Krell. It had been years since she’d been a pilot, yet as she stood with headphones on—ships swirling around her—the *feel* of it returned to her. The hum of the booster, the rush of a banking ship, the rattle of destructor fire. The pulse of the battlefield.

Some days, she entertained fancies of climbing into a ship and joining the fray again. Then she banished those idiot dreams. The DDF was too low on ships to waste one on an old woman with shriveled reaction times. Fragmented tales—and some old print history books—spoke of great generals who took up a weapon and joined their soldiers on the front lines. Judy, however, knew she was no Julius Caesar. She was barely a Nero.

Still, Judy Ivans was dangerous in other ways.

She watched the battle spin and fly beneath the shadow of the slowly dropping shipyard. The Krell had committed almost sixty ships to this fight—two-thirds of their maximum, a major investment for them. It was clear they knew that if that wreckage had fallen into DDF hands intact, it would have been a huge boon. There had been hundreds of acclivity rings on that massive ship/station.

Now, salvage reported that fewer than a dozen so far were recoverable—and Judy had lost fourteen ships in the engagement. She saw, in their deaths, her own faults. She hadn't been willing to truly *commit*. If she'd raised all of their reserve ships and pilots, then thrown them at the battle, she might have earned hundreds of acclivity rings. Instead she'd wavered, worried about a trap, until it was too late.

That was what she lacked, compared to people like Caesar of old. She needed to be willing to commit everything.

Rikolfr, her aide, stepped up to her with a clipboard full of notes. Judy rewound the battlefield, highlighting a specific pilot. The cadet who had given her so much trouble.

Ships exploded and pilots died. Judy wouldn't let herself feel for the deaths; she *couldn't* let herself feel for them. As long as they had more pilots than acclivity rings—and they did, slightly—then personnel was the more disposable of the two resources.

Finally, Judy took off her headphones.

"She flies well," Rikolfr said.

"Too well?" Judy asked.

Rikolfr flipped through papers on his clipboard. "Newest data is in from her helmet sensors. It hasn't been encouraging during her training—almost no anomalies. But that fight you're watching, the battle at the falling shipyard, well . . ."

He turned the clipboard toward her, showing a set of readings that were literally off the chart.

"The Writellum section of her brain," Rikolfr said, "went *crazy* with activity when she was around the Krell. Dr. Halbeth is certain this is proof of the defect, though Iglom is less certain. He cites the lack of evidence except for this one engagement."

Judy grunted, watching the coward's ship loop around, then fly into the very bowels of the falling shipyard.

"Halbeth recommends immediately removing the girl from duty," Rikolfr noted. "But Dr. Thior . . . well, she is going to be trouble, as you would guess."

Thior, who was unfortunately head of Alta Base medical, didn't believe that the defect was real. Even the history of the thing was controversial. Reports of it dated back to the *Defiant* itself—and the mutiny on board the flagship that had ended with the fleet crashing here on Detritus.

Few people knew about the mutiny, and fewer still the fact that a defect in some of the crew had been the cause. These things weren't clear even to Judy. But some of the most important—and most merited—families in the lower caverns traced their lineage to the mutineers. Those families fought against acknowledging the defect, and wanted to keep rumors of it secret. But they hadn't seen what it could do to someone.

Judy had. Firsthand.

“Who is supporting Thior this time?” Judy asked.

Rikolfr flipped a few pages, then displayed the latest round of letters from prominent party members. At their head was a letter from NAL Algernon Weight, whose son, Jorgen, was in the coward's flight. Jorgen had spoken highly of the girl on repeated occasions, so now came the questions. Wouldn't it be for the best to hold this girl up as a sign of true Defiant redemption? A symbol of how any person, regardless of heritage, could return to the fold and provide service to the state?

*Damn it.* Judy thought, pausing the hologram as the coward hit her overburn in a near-disastrous attempt to escape. *How much proof is Algernon going to require?*

“Orders, sir?” Rikolfr asked.

“Tell Dr. Halbeth to write a condemnation of Thior's explanations, then see if Dr. Iglom can be persuaded to offer strong support of the defect's existence, particularly in this girl. Tell her I'd consider it a personal favor if she could strengthen her stand.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Rikolfr retreated, and Judy watched the rest of the battle, remembering a similar fight long ago.

Thior and the others could call the defect superstition. They could say that what had happened with Chaser was coincidence. But they hadn't been there.

And Judy was going to make damn sure nothing like that ever happened again. One way or another.

## 30

“So I’m pretty sure she won’t *ever* kick me out,” I said, working with Rig to apply new sealant to M-Bot’s wing.

“You can infer more from a look than anyone I know,” Rig said. “Just because she didn’t kick you out this time doesn’t mean she won’t in the future.”

“She won’t,” I said.

“She won’t,” Doomslug said with a fluting trill, imitating the inflection of my voice from her perch on a nearby rock.

Rig had done an amazing job with M-Bot’s broken wing. Together, we’d torn off the bent metal, then recovered the usable parts. Then somehow, Rig had persuaded his new supervisors to let him practice on one of the manufactories.

With new parts in hand, we’d been able to repair the entire wing. The next week had been spent removing the old layer of sealant. Today, we were going over the entire hull with a new coat. Now that I’d entered my third month of training, we’d earned occasional R&R—so today, our flight had only a half day of classes.

I’d come back early and had met Rig to work on the ship. Rig painted the sealant on with a small spray device, and I followed behind with a two-handed machine that looked kind of like a big flashlight. The blue light from it made the sealant firm up and solidify.

The process, though slow and grueling, filled in scratches and dents on M-Bot’s hull. The slick, air-resistant sealant also filled in and smoothed out seams, leaving behind a sleek, shiny surface. We’d chosen black, to match his old color.

“I still can’t believe they let you borrow all this stuff,” I said as I slowly positioned the light behind where Rig was spraying.

“After how enthused they were by my atmospheric scoop designs?” Rig said. “They seemed ready to promote me to head of the department on the spot. Nobody even batted an eye when I asked if I could bring this stuff home to ‘disassemble it and see how it works.’ They think I’m some kind of prodigy with eclectic methods.”

“You’re not still embarrassed, are you?” I said. “Rig, this technology could *single-handedly* save the entire DDF.”

“I know,” he said. “I just wish . . . you know, that I really *were* a prodigy.”

I set the light on the ground to give my arms a break. “Seriously, Rig?” I waved toward M-Bot’s wing, which now glistened with a new black sealant job. “You’re telling me that fixing a technologically advanced starship’s wing, practically on your own, in the middle of an uninhabited cave with minimal equipment, *isn’t* the work of a prodigy?”

Rig stepped back, raising his goggles and inspecting the wing. Then he grinned. “It does look pretty good, doesn’t it? And it will be *even better* when that last part is sealed. Eh?” He hefted the spray.

I sighed, stretching, but picked the lighting device back up. I followed behind as he started spraying the last section of the hull, near the front.

“So, you going to spend more nights in the bunks now?” he asked as we worked.

“No. I can’t risk getting the others involved. This is between me and Ironsides.”

“I still think you’re reading too much into what she said.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Ironsides is a warrior. She knows that to win this fight, she can’t just defeat me—she needs to demoralize me. She needs to be able to say I was a coward, like the lies she tells about my father.”

Rig continued to work in silence for a few minutes, and I thought he was going to let the argument pass. He sprayed a careful line of sealant under the part of the hull that locked into the cockpit. Then, though, he said in a more subdued tone, “That’s great, Spensa. But . . . have you ever paused to wonder what you’ll do if you’re wrong?”

I shrugged. “If I’m wrong, she’ll kick me out. Nothing I can do about that.”

“I wasn’t talking about the admiral. I meant your father, Spensa. What if . . . you know . . . what if he *did* retreat?”

“My father wasn’t a coward.”

“But—”

“*My father was not a coward.*”

Rig glanced away from his work and met my eyes. The glare I gave back would have been enough to silence most people, but he held my gaze.

“What about me?” he asked. “Am *I* a coward, Spensa?”

My fury sputtered, then died.

He looked back to his spraying. “You say if you drop out, it will prove you’re a coward. Well, I dropped out. So I’m a coward. Basically the *worst thing you could imagine.*”

“Rig, it’s different.”

“Is Cobb a coward? He ejected, you know. He got shot down and ejected. Would you call *him* a coward, to his face?”

“I . . .”

Rig finished covering the last metallic section with black sealant, then stepped back. He shook his head and looked at me. “Spin, maybe you’re right. Maybe there’s some big conspiracy that has pinned a great betrayal on your father. Or maybe, you know, he just got scared. Maybe he was human, and acted like humans sometimes do. Maybe the *problem* is that everyone has made such a big deal of it.”

“I don’t have to listen to this,” I said, setting down the sealing light. I stomped off—though the only place I could stomp to was the other side of the cavern.

“Spin, you can’t walk off and ignore me,” Rig said from behind. “This cavern is, like, twenty meters across.”

I sat down. Doomslug trilled beside me, imitating my huff of annoyance. Like usual, I hadn’t caught sight of her moving over. The way she snuck about only when nobody was watching her was uncanny.

From the sounds of it, Rig picked up the light and sealed the last section himself. I sat with my back to him as he worked.

“Fume if you want,” he noted. “Snap at me if you want. But at least *think* about it. You seem like you really want to defy the admiral and the DDF. Maybe you should consider *not* allowing them to define victory or failure for you.”

I snorted. “You sound like FM.”

“So she’s smart *and* cute.”

I twisted to look back. “FM? Cute?”

“She has nice eyes.”

I gaped at him.

“What?” he said, blushing as he worked.

“You didn’t stutter, or fumble, or *anything*.” I said. “What did you do with Rodge, you Krell monster?”

“What?” M-Bot said, lights on his wings flashing on. “Rodge is a Krell!”

“Sarcasm,” the two of us said in unison. Rig finished the sealing, then set the device down. He looked over at me. “You will *not* tell her I said those things. She probably doesn’t even remember who I am.” He hesitated. “Does she?”

“Of course she does,” I lied.

Rig smiled again. He looked so different now. So confident. What had happened to him these last two months?

*He found something he loves.* I realized as he put his hands on his hips and smiled at M-Bot’s new finish. And really, the ship *did* look incredible.

All our lives, Rig and I had dreamed of the DDF. But what had he said when he dropped out? *That’s your dream. I was just along for the ride.*

Deciding not to be a pilot *had* been the right choice for him. I’d known that, but had I *known* it? *Really?*

I stood up, then walked over and put an arm around him. “You’re no coward,” I said. “I’m an idiot if I made you feel like you were. And this? What you’ve done here? This is better than ‘pretty good.’ Rig, this is scudding incredible.”

His smile widened. “Well, we won’t know for certain on that count until you take the ship into the air.” He checked his watch. “I should have time enough to watch you take off.”

“Take off?” I gaped. “You mean he’s ready to fly? He’s *fixed*?”

“M-Bot!” Rig called. “Basic status update!”

“Acclivity ring: functional. Life support and pilot care facilities: functional. Maneuvering and flight controls: functional. Shield: functional. Light-lance: functional.”

“Incredible!” I said. With the acclivity ring and the maneuvering thrusters, I could move up into the air and get around a little—though not at any reasonable speed.

“We still need a booster,” Rig said. “And new guns; I’m not going to risk trying to fabricate either of those, even with my newfound status in the engineering department.”

“Boosters: nonfunctional,” M-Bot added. “Destructors: nonfunctional. Cytonic hyperdrive: nonfunctional.”

“I also have no idea how you’ll get out of here,” Rig said, looking up at the ceiling. “How did you even get *in*. M-Bot?”

“Likely I used a cytonic hyperjump to teleport,” M-Bot said. “I . . . can’t tell you how it worked. Only that this device allowed faster-than-light travel through the galaxy.”

I perked up. “Can we fix *that*?”

“Best I can tell,” Rig said, “it’s not broken—it’s *missing*. M-Bot’s diagnostics indicate where this ‘cytonic hyperdrive’ should be, and it’s an empty box with a display panel on one end. Someone must have taken the mechanism—whatever it was.”

Huh. Maybe the old pilot had taken it?

Rig flipped through his notebook, then waved for me to look over his shoulder. “I’m pretty certain I fixed the maneuvering thrusters on that broken wing,” he said, pointing at a schematic. “But be sure he leaves diagnostics on to record it all, so I can check to make sure everything is in order.” He flipped to the next page. “And once we know he’s flying right, I want to disassemble his shield igniter and see if I can figure out why it can apparently—by his specs—take three times the punishment of a standard DDF shield.”

I grinned. “*That* ought to make you popular with the engineering and design teams.”

“Yeah, unless they start to get suspicious.” Rig hesitated, then spoke more softly. “I did eventually try and look at his AI mechanism, but he wouldn’t let me open the housing. He even threatened to electrify it. He says that device—along with some other systems—is classified. Stealth systems, communications systems . . . some very important stuff. Spin, to *really* help the DDF, we would need to let an expert in here to disassemble and analyze the ship. I can only do so much.”

I felt something wrench inside me, like gears locking up from lack of grease. I glanced back at M-Bot.

“He has warned,” Rig said, “that if we reveal him, he will attempt to destroy his own systems to keep from disobeying his old pilot’s orders.”



“Maybe . . . I can talk sense into him?”

“M-Bot doesn’t seem capable of sense,” Rig said, gazing at the ship and—yet again—seeming to take a moment to bask in just how great it looked. Clean, freshly painted, sleek and dangerous. The four destructor cavities, two on each wing, gaped open, and the rear booster was missing. But otherwise it was *perfect*.

“Rig,” I said softly, in awe, “I seriously can’t believe you let me rope you into this.”

“If you want to pay me back,” he said, “ask FM to meet me for lunch in the park someday.” Then he immediately blushed and looked down. “I mean, maybe, if the topic comes up or something. Or not.”

I grinned, punching him in the arm. “So you *are* still Rig. I was starting to worry there.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s ignore what I said and focus on the important things. The insane AI says its stealth systems are good enough to keep the DDF from noticing it, and I guess we just have to trust it on that one. So what do you say? Want to take it up for a quick test flight?”

“Scud, yes!”

Rig looked up. “Any ideas on how to get out though? That gap is barely large enough for a person.”

“I . . . might have an idea,” I said. “But it’s probably going to be a tad messy. And dangerous.”

Rig sighed. “I suppose I shouldn’t have expected otherwise.”

About an hour later, I climbed into M-Bot’s cockpit, nearly trembling with excitement. I placed Doomslug in the seat behind me, then did up my buckles.

My little cavern looked bare now that we’d packed up my kitchen and all of Rig’s equipment. We’d stowed what we could in the cockpit, and had hauled the rest out through the crack using my light-line. Rig waited a safe distance away. I got to do the fun part myself.

And, like most “fun parts,” it would involve breaking things.

“You ready?” I said to M-Bot.

“I have basically two states,” he said. “Ready, and powered down.”

“Needs work as a catchphrase,” I said. “But the sentiment is pretty cool.” I rested my hands on the control sphere and the throttle, breathing in and

out.

“Just so you know,” M-Bot said. “I could hear what you two were saying earlier, when you were whispering. The part where Rodge said I was insane.”

“I realized you could probably hear,” I said. “You *are* a surveillance ship, after all.”

“AIs can’t be insane,” he said. “We can only do what we’re programmed to do. Which is the opposite of insanity. But . . . you’d tell me, right? If I start to sound . . . off?”

“The mushroom thing *is* a little over the top.”

“I can sense that. I also can’t help it. The mandate is very strong inside me. Along with my pilot’s last words.”

“Lie low. Don’t get into any fights.”

“And wait for him. Yes. It’s why I can’t let you reveal me to your DDF, even if I know it would help you and your people. I simply *must* follow my orders.” He paused. “I am worried about you taking me into the air. Did my pilot mean ‘lie low’ as in ‘stay underground,’ or did he merely mean ‘don’t let yourself be seen’?”

“I’m sure he meant the second,” I said. “We’ll just do a quick flight around the area.”

“It will not be ‘quick,’ ” he said. “With only maneuvering thrusters, we’ll fly about as fast as you can walk.”

Good enough for now. I engaged the acclivity ring, raising us smoothly. I pulled up the landing struts, turned us around in a slow circle, then dipped us to one side and then the other. I grinned. The controls were similar enough, and there was an energy to the responses that my Poco simply didn’t have.

Now, how to get out of the cavern. I tipped the acclivity ring backward on its hinges, which in turn tipped M-Bot’s nose up. I launched the light-lance, spearing it into a cracked portion of the ceiling. I pulled back, using the rotational thrusters, then lowered the power of the acclivity ring. That gave us some force, even without a booster.

The light-lance went taut. Dust and chips of stone streamed down from the ceiling. Doomslug mimicked the sound from behind me, fluting in an energetic, excited way.

A portion of the ceiling collapsed in a shower of rock and dust. I disengaged the light-lance, looking up through the hole. There was no

skylight nearby, so above was a dark uniform greyness. The sky.

“Can your hologram create a projection of a new roof?” I asked M-Bot.

“Yes, but it will be less secure,” he said. “Sonar imaging can see through the hologram. But . . . It feels like so long since I’ve seen the sky.” He seemed wistful, though he would probably claim that was some kind of programming quirk.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Come on. Let’s fly!”

“I . . .,” M-Bot said softly. “Yes, all right. Let’s go! I do want to fly again. Just be careful, and keep me out of sight.”

I raised us up through the hole, then waved to Rig, who was standing with our things a short distance away.

“Engaging stealth mechanisms,” M-Bot said. “We should now be invisible to DDF sensors.”

I grinned. I was in the sky. With *my own* ship. I slammed the throttle forward.

We stayed in place.

Right. No booster.

I engaged the maneuvering thrusters, which were intended more for fine-tuned positioning than they were for actual movement. And we started flying. Sloooooooooowly.

“Yippee?” M-Bot said.

“It *is* kind of a letdown, isn’t it?”

Still, I did a small loop for Rig, with diagnostics running. When I completed the circle, he gave a thumbs-up, then settled his pack on his shoulder and started hiking off. He had to get back to Igneous to return the sealing equipment.

I couldn’t quite persuade myself to land. After all this time, I wanted to fly a little longer with M-Bot. So I grabbed the altitude lever. The control sphere could make the ship bob up and down, powering the acclivity ring for the finer points of dodging. But if you wanted a quick ascent, this was the way.

I eased it toward me.

We shot upward into the sky.

I hadn’t expected it to work *this* well. We rocketed upward, and I felt g-forces slam into me, forcing me down. I cringed, noting how fast we were going, and eased off the lever. That kind of g-force would . . .

. . . crush me?

I felt the acceleration, but not nearly as much as I should have. I couldn't be pulling more than three Gs, though I felt like it should have been much more.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Can you be more specific? I have over a hundred and seventy semiautonomous subroutines that—"

"The g-forces," I said, looking out the window, watching the ground retreat at an alarming pace. "I should be blacking out about now."

"Oh, yes. That. My gravitational capacitors are capable of belaying sixty percent of g-forces, with a maximum threshold of well over a hundred Earth standard. I *did* warn you that your ships had primitive systems for handling pilot stress."

I let off on the altitude lever, and the ship stopped accelerating.

"Would you like to engage rotational g-force management for further help withstanding the forces?" M-Bot asked.

"Like where my seat turns around?" I asked, remembering what Rig had explained about M-Bot. Humans didn't do well with g-forces in the wrong directions—it was much harder for us to take downward forces, for example, because they pushed all the blood in our bodies into our feet. M-Bot could compensate for that by rotating the seat, so that I took the forces backward—in a way easier for my body to handle.

"Not for now," I said. "Let me first get used to how you fly."

"Very well," M-Bot said.

We quickly reached 100,000 feet, which was around the highest that we flew DDF ships in regular situations. I reached to decelerate, but hesitated. Why not go a little higher? I'd always wanted to. Now, nobody was there to stop me.

I kept us going, soaring upward until the altitude indicator hit 500,000 feet. There, finally, I slowed us, admiring the view. I'd never been so high. The mountain peaks below looked like nothing more than crumpled-up paper. I could actually see the planet *curving*—and not merely some faint arc either. I felt as if I could stretch onto my toes and see the whole planet.

I was still barely halfway to the rubble belt, which I'd been told was in low orbit starting at around a million feet. However, from this height, I could see it far better. What I saw from the surface as only vague patterns now manifested as enormous swaths of metal upon metal, vaguely lit by some sources I couldn't make out.

Looking at it, realizing it was still well over a hundred kilometers away, the grand scale of it finally started to strike me. Those little specks that looked like individual dots . . . those had to be as large as the piece of debris that had crashed down during that fight a week back.

It was all so *enormous*. My jaw dropped as I gazed at it, taking in the many sections, all rotating and churning in esoteric orbits. Mostly just shadows, moving, swirling, layers upon layers.

“Would you like to get closer?” M-Bot said.

“I don’t dare. They said that some of the junk would shoot at me.”

“Well, those *are* obvious remnants of a semiautonomous defense grid,” he said. “With the shadows of outer habitat platforms behind, I’d say—all interspersed with broken shipyards and matter reclamation drones.”

I watched it shifting, moving, and tried to imagine a time when this had been functional. Used. *Lived in*. A world above the world.

“Yes, some of those defense platforms are clearly operational,” M-Bot said. “Even I would have difficulty slipping past them. Note those asteroids I’m highlighting on your canopy; slag formations on the surface indicate their ancient purpose. Some strategies for suppressing a planet include towing interplanetary bodies into position and dropping them. This can accomplish anything from the removal of a specific city to an extinction-level disaster.”

I breathed out softly, horrified to imagine it.

“Er . . . not that I was originally a *combat ship*. mind you,” M-Bot said. “I don’t know about orbital bombardment from my own programming. I suppose somebody must have told it to me once.”

“I thought you didn’t lie.”

“I don’t! I genuinely believe that I’m an advanced, well-armed, stealth-capable ship because it will help me harvest fungi better. That is *not at all* irrational.”

“So all the Krell really would need to do to deal with us,” I said, “is shove some of these asteroids down?”

“It’s a little harder than you make it sound,” M-Bot said. “The Krell would need a ship large enough to move something of such a sizable mass. That would likely require a capital ship—which those defense platforms would probably be able to shoot down with ease. Small ships could get through some of those gaps though. Which I guess you already know, considering how often you fight them.”

I settled back in the seat, letting myself enjoy the view. The expansive world below, the sky that somehow felt *smaller* than it once had. It was only a narrow band around the planet, capped by the rubble belt.

I stared upward for a time, admiring the grand motions of the rubble belt—the enormous shells and platforms, moving according to their ancient and esoteric design. There must have been dozens of layers, but in that moment—for only the second time in my life—it all aligned. And I saw out into space. True infinity, broken by a few twinkling stars.

Which I *swore* I could hear. Whispers. No distinct words, but something real. Gran-Gran was right. If I listened, I *could* hear the stars. They sounded like the horns of battle, calling out, drawing me toward them . . .

*Don't be a fool.* I thought. *You don't have a booster. If the Krell find you, you'll be little more than target practice.*

Reluctantly, I began to ease us downward. That was probably enough for one day.

We descended slowly, letting gravity do most of the work. Unfortunately, we'd drifted some distance in the wind, so when we landed, I had to inch us—with those tiny maneuvering thrusters—back toward the hole.

It took long enough that by the time we got there, I was yawning. Doomslug imitated the sound of my yawn from where she'd settled down into the blanket behind my seat.

Finally, we lowered into the cavern and landed near M-Bot's original resting spot. "Well, I'd call that a great first run," I said.

"Er, yes," M-Bot said. "We went very high, didn't we?"

"If I can only figure out a way to get a booster, we'll have you flying for real in no time."

"Um . . ."

"You could try fighting the Krell, if you wanted," I said, testing whether I could push him further. "We could do that while 'lying low'—we just wouldn't tell anyone what or who we are! The black phantom ship with no callsign! Flying in to help the DDF in times of need!"

"I don't think—"

"Imagine it, M-Bot! Dodging and swooping amid exploding barrages. Soaring and striving, proving yourself stronger than your enemies. A grand symphony of destruction and power!"

"Or, even better, sitting in the cave! Doing none of that!"

"We could fight with stealth mode on . . .," I said.

“That is still the opposite of lying low. I’m sorry, Spensa. *I must not fight*. We can fly again—I kind of liked it—but we cannot *ever* fight.”

“Ever fight,” Doomslug added.

I turned off the ship’s nonessentials, then leaned back my seat, feeling sick. I had access to something awesome, something powerful, something amazing—but I couldn’t use it? I had a weapon that didn’t want me to swing it. What should I do?

I didn’t know. But I found it most disturbing that my ship was . . . well, a coward.

I sighed and started getting ready for bed. My frustration with M-Bot faded; I was too excited by the fact that I’d actually gotten him into the air.

As I finally settled down—seat reclined, blanket pulled around me, Doomslug moved to a fold-out shelf in the canopy—M-Bot spoke again, softly. “Spensa?” he said. “You don’t mind, do you? Staying out of combat? I *have* to obey my orders.”

“No you don’t.”

“Um, I’m a computer. That’s basically *all I do*. I literally can’t even count to zero without an order.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I said. “Considering the things you’ve said to me.”

“That’s a personality programmed to interact with humans.”

“Excuses,” I said, yawning, dimming the lights. “You might have a machine mind, but you’re still a person.”

“But—”

“I can hear you,” I said, yawning. “I can hear your soul. Like the stars.” It was a faint hum in the back of my mind, and I hadn’t noticed it until right then. But it was there.

Whatever he thought, M-Bot was more alive than he gave himself credit for being. I could simply *feel* it.

I started to drift off.

He spoke again, his voice even quieter. “The orders are the only thing I know for sure, Spensa. My old pilot, my purpose. That’s who I was.”

“Become someone new then.”

“Do you have any idea how hard that is?”

I thought about my own cowardice. The feelings of loss, and of inadequacy, now that I actually had to do the things I’d always bragged that I would. I pulled my blanket close.

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “Why would I ever want to be anyone else?”  
He didn’t respond, and eventually I drifted off to sleep.



## 31

My flight with M-Bot, though brief and mostly linear, still managed to overshadow the next two weeks of simulation training.

I performed a maneuver, chasing a Krell ship through a series of tight turns around chunks of debris, Hurl on my wing. But my mind started to drift. The Krell ship got away.

“Hey!” Kimmalyn said as we regrouped. “Did you guys see? I didn’t crash!”

I listened with half an ear—still distracted—as they all chattered.

“*I* crashed though,” FM admitted. “I hit a piece of debris and went down in a fiery heap.”

“Not your fault!” Kimmalyn said. “As the Saint always said, true failure is choosing to fail.”

“Besides, FM,” Arturo added, “you’ve still crashed fewer times than the rest of us, total.”

“I won’t hold that record for long, if I keep this up,” FM said.

“You’re just trying to be *subversive* by crashing today,” Hurl said, “because nobody expects it from you. You rebel you.”

FM chuckled softly.

“You could all do what nobody expects,” Jorgen said on the group line, “and actually line up straight for once. Amphi, I’m looking at you.”

“Right, right,” Arturo said, hovering his ship into place. “Though I guess technically Jorgen has crashed less than you, FM. He’s flown half as often. It’s hard to blow up when all you do is sit around complaining and giving orders.”

“As the Saint always said,” Kimmalyn added again in a solemn voice, “true failure is choosing to fail.”

Jorgen didn't defend himself, though I thought I heard a quick intake of breath from him. I grimaced. It was true that Jorgen tended to hang back and watch us run exercises, offering instruction rather than flying himself. But maybe the others would act differently if they knew he spent late nights practicing on his own afterward.

I felt ashamed, suddenly. Jorgen's callsign, and the way the others treated him, were partially my fault. He didn't deserve all that. I mean, he could be insufferable, but he *was* trying to do his best.

As Cobb sent us in for another round of dogfighting, Rig's words floated up from the back of my mind.

*What about me? Am I a coward, Spensa?*

I was certain he wasn't. But I'd lived my childhood clinging to a simple rule, reinforced by Gran-Gran's stories. Good people were brave. Bad people were cowards. I knew my father had been a good person, so it was obvious to me that he couldn't have run away. End of story. Close the book.

It was getting harder to hold to that particular black-and-white line. I'd promised Hurl I wouldn't be a coward. But did any coward *intend* to turn and run? I'd never felt like fleeing a battle, but I was still surprised by the real emotions of being a pilot. By how much it had hurt to lose Bim and Morningtide, by how overwhelmed I sometimes felt.

Was it possible that something similar, for a brief moment, had caused my father to retreat? And if he had, could I *really* promise that I wouldn't someday do the same?

I dodged around a chunk of debris, but almost clipped Hurl's wing.

"Come on, Spin," she said. "Head in the game. Eye on the ball."

"The ball?"

"Sorry. League metaphor."

"I didn't get to go to many games." Workers got tickets as rewards for exemplary merits. But it would be good to talk about something, to get my thoughts off my worries. "I barely know what you did. Something about hoverbikes? Did you fly?"

"Not quite," Hurl said as we dodged back and forth, a Krell ship—as per the exercise—coming in behind us. "The Digball League gets acclivity rings that are too small to fly ships. Our bikes could go full three-D in little bursts, but each bike is allotted a fixed amount of air time. Part of the strategy is knowing when to use it."

She sounded wistful. "Do you miss the game?" I asked.

“A little. Mostly my team. This is way better though.” A flash of destructor fire sprayed around us. “More dangerous. More of a rush.”

We did a wave-dodge, where we split in opposite directions under heavy destructor fire. Hurl stayed on our target while I looped back down and offered fire support, chasing off the enemy.

I caught up at the next turn, falling in behind Hurl. Our target flew extra low, only a hundred feet or so off the ground. We descended, tossing up plumes of blue-grey dust behind us, and darted past an ancient piece of debris. Long since scavenged for its acclivity stone, it lay exposed like the skeleton of a disturbed grave.

“So,” Hurl said as we flew through valleys, staying on our target, “what about you? You never talk about what you used to do before the DDF.”

“Aren’t we supposed to keep our ‘head in the game’?”

“Eh. Except when I’m curious.”

“I . . . I was a ratcatcher.”

“Like, for one of the protein factories?”

“No. I was solo. The factory scouts hunt the lower caverns out pretty well, so I built my own speargun, explored farther caverns, and caught them on my own. My mom sold the meat for requisition chits to workers on their way home.”

“Wow. That’s badass.”

“You think so?”

“Totally.”

I smiled, feeling warm at that.

The Krell turned and accelerated upward. “I’m going in,” I said, and hit my overburn. I raced up at an angle, my g-force line going to max.

*Tonight. I thought to the Krell, your ashen remains will mix with the planet’s dust, and your howls of pain shall echo upon the wind!* I cut into the ship’s wake, getting just close enough to hit my IMP and destroy its shield.

Hurl flew past me, her destructor fire sounding over the blaring klaxon that warned my shield was down. The Krell ship exploded into molten debris.

Hurl let out a whoop, but then I blushed, remembering my line of thought. Ashes mixing with dust and howls on the wind? That sort of thing—once so exciting to me—now seemed . . . less the words of a hero, and

more the words of someone trying to *sound* heroic. My father had never talked like that.

As I reignited my shield, a light on the communication panel lit up, announcing that Cobb was listening in. “Nice work,” he said. “You two are starting to make a good team.”

“Thanks, Cobb,” I said.

“It would be better if Spin could *spend time* with the rest of us,” Hurl added. “You know—instead of sleeping in her cave.”

“Let me know when you intend to take that up with the admiral,” Cobb said. “I’ll be sure to leave the building so I don’t have to listen to her shout at you. Cobb out.”

The light went off, and Hurl hovered her ship down beside mine. “The way she treats you is stupid, Spin. You *are* a badass. Like that stuff you always say.”

“Thanks,” I answered. I could feel my cheeks heating up. “Those things make me feel self-conscious now though.”

“Don’t let them get to you, Spin. Be who you are.”

*And who am I?* I looked upward, wondering if the simulation ever created holes in the debris—if it ever let you see through to the highest sky.

We ran a few more exercises before Jorgen called us back in to line up. We hovered in place, and I checked the clock on my dash. Only 1600? We still had several hours of training left. Was Cobb going to call it early and send us for more centrifuge time, like he’d done yesterday?

“All right,” Cobb announced over the radio. “You’re ready for the next lesson.”

“We get to use destructors?” Kimmalyn exclaimed.

I leaned forward in my seat to look out at her cockpit. We’d been fighting with destructors for weeks now.

“Sorry,” she said. “Got caught up in the hype.”

A Krell bomber materialized in front of us. It was a sturdier build than the average Krell ship. It was the same shape, but in the center between its wings, it carried an enormous lifebuster. The bomb was even bigger than the ship was. I shivered, remembering the last time I’d seen one of these—when Bim and I had chased one down.

A scene materialized farther out: a mess of fighting ships, some Krell, some DDF.

“Our AA guns cover a range out to one hundred and twenty klicks from Alta,” Cobb said. “The guns need to be big enough to blast Krell ships through their shields—not to mention big enough to shoot apart large debris so it burns up while falling. But being so big limits their functional arc. They’re really good at picking off distant objects, but can’t hit things too close.

“If Krell get low enough—about six hundred feet from the ground—they can come in under the big guns. The smaller gun emplacements—like the ones Quirk trained on before—don’t have the punch to get through Krell shields. Without fighters IMPing the enemy, the small gun emplacements have trouble.”

The simulation highlighted a specific ship among the ones fighting in the distance. Another bomber.

“The Krell distract us with dogfights and falling debris, then often try to sneak through a bomber carrying a lifebuster,” Cobb continued. “You need to be constantly aware, and watching, to report sighting a lifebuster. And I’ll warn you, they’ve used decoys before.”

“We report it,” Hurl said, “and then we shoot it, right? Or maybe better—shoot it first, *then* report?”

“Do that,” Cobb said, “and it could be disastrous. Lifebusters are often rigged to explode if damaged. Shoot one of these down at the wrong time, and you could get dozens of your companion pilots killed.”

“Oh,” Hurl said.

“Only the admiral, or acting command staff, can authorize shooting down a lifebuster,” Cobb continued. “Often we can chase the bomber away by threatening it—lifebusters are valuable, and as far as we can surmise, difficult to produce. If that doesn’t work, the admiral will send in a special strike team to shoot down the bomber.

“Be extremely careful. Igneous is far enough below the surface that only a direct hit right on top will send a blast down deep enough to harm it, but casually destroying a lifebuster too close—even forty or fifty klicks away—could destroy Alta in the corrosion wave the bomb releases. So if you spot a bomber, you call it in immediately, then let someone with the experience, data, and authority decide what to do. Understood?”

Scattered mumbles of “Understood” followed. Then Jorgen made us all sound off one at a time, giving a verbal acknowledgment. Maybe we did treat him a little too harshly, but scud . . . he could be annoying.

“Great,” Cobb said. “Flightleader, scramble your people through this battlefield. We’ll do some scenarios where we practice spotting, reporting, and—yes—taking down lifebusters. Any guesses how often you all will blow yourselves up?”

Turned out, we blew ourselves up *a lot*.

The lifebuster drills were among the most difficult we’d ever done. In our first days flying, we’d learned to do what was called a pilot’s scan. A quick assessment of all the things we needed to keep in mind while flying: booster indicators, navigation instruments, altitude, communication channels, wingmates, flightmates, terrain . . . and a dozen more.

Going into battle added a host of other things to watch. Orders from the flightleader or from Alta, tactics, enemies. A pilot’s situational awareness was one of the most mentally taxing parts of the job.

Doing all of that while constantly watching for a bomber . . . well, it was tough. Extremely tough.

Sometimes Cobb would run us through entire hour-long battle simulations and never send in a bomber. Sometimes he’d send in seven—six decoys and a real one.

The bombers were remarkably slow—they maxed out at Mag-2—but carried a deadly payload. When a bomb went off, it hit with three waves. The first explosion was meant to blast downward, penetrating rock, collapsing or ripping open caverns. After that was a second explosion—it was a strange greenish-black color. This alien corrosion could exterminate life, causing a chain reaction in organic matter. The third explosion was a shock wave, meant to drive this terrible burning green light outward.

We ran simulation after simulation. Time and time again, one of us blew the bomb up too soon without giving warning for the others to overburn away—which vaporized our entire flight. Multiple times, we misjudged how close we’d gotten to Alta—so that when we destroyed the bomber and detonated the bomb, Cobb sent the grim report. “You just killed the entire population of Alta. I’m dead now. Congratulations.”

After one particularly frustrating run, the six of us pulled up together and watched the sickly green light expand.

“I’m—” Cobb began.

“You’re dead,” FM said. “We get it, Cobb. What are we *supposed* to do? If the bomb gets too close to the city, do we have any other choice?”

“No,” Cobb said softly. “You don’t.”

“But—”

“If it comes down to destroying Alta but saving Igneous,” Cobb said, “Igneous is more important. There’s a reason we rotate a third of our ships, pilots, and command staff into the deep caverns. The DDF can survive—maybe—if Alta is destroyed. But without the apparatus to make new ships, we’re done for. So if the admiral orders it, you *shoot that bomb* and make it detonate, even if doing so destroys Alta.”

We watched the green light crawling through an ever-widening sphere of destruction. Finally it faded.

Cobb made us fly exercises until I was numb from exhaustion, my reaction times slowing. Then he made us do it again. He wanted to drill deeply into us to *always* watch for bombers, no matter how tired we were.

During that last run, I hated Cobb like I’d never hated anyone. Even more than the admiral.

We failed to stop the bomb this time too. I reset my position, falling into line by rote to start the next run. However, my canopy vanished. I blinked, surprised to be back in the real world. The others began pulling off helmets and standing up to stretch. What . . . what time was it?

“Did I recognize that last battle, Cobb?” Arturo asked, standing up. “Was it the Battle of Trajerto?”

“With modifications,” Cobb said.

*Trajerto*. I thought. It had happened about five years ago; we’d come very close to losing Alta. A Krell flight had snuck in and destroyed the smaller AA guns. Fortunately, a couple of DDF scout ships had brought down the lifebuster before it could get close enough to Alta.

“You’re using historical battles for our simulations?” I asked, trying to push through my stupor.

“Of course I am,” Cobb said. “You think I have time to make up these simulations?”

Something about that struck me, but I was too exhausted to put my finger on it. I climbed out of my mockpit, tossed my helmet onto my seat, and stretched. Scud, I was hungry, but I didn’t have any dinner with me—the next batch of jerky was curing back at my cave.

I had a long, tired, hungry walk ahead of me. I grabbed my pack, slung it over my shoulder, and started out.

Hurl caught up to me in the hallway, then nodded in the direction of the nearby dorm section. I could read her expression. They could pretend to be tired, bring food back to their rooms . . .

I shook my head. It wasn't worth riling the admiral.

Hurl gave me a raised fist. "Badass," she whispered. I found energy for a smile, raised my own, then we parted.

I trudged toward the exit. The other classrooms were dark, save one, where the instructor was lecturing another flight of cadets. "The best pilots can steer a ship out of an uncontrolled fall," a woman's voice said, echoing in the hallway. "Your first reaction might be to eject, but if you want to be a *real* hero, you will do whatever you can to save your acclivity ring. A Defiant protects the people, not the self."

It was basically the opposite of what Cobb had taught us.

On my way through the orchard outside the base, I noticed my radio blinking. M-Bot wanted to talk with me. I had persuaded him, with effort, to stop breaking into my line while I was training. It just seemed too likely that someone would overhear us.

"Hey," I said into the line. "Bored?"

"I can't get bored." He paused. "But I'll have you know that I can think at thousands of times the speed of a human brain—so twelve hours to you is by relative measure a long time to me. A *really* long time."

I smiled.

"Reeeaaaaalllly long," he added.

"What did you think of the training today?"

"I took some careful notes for further review," he said. Most nights, I went over with M-Bot what I'd done wrong. His programs offered excellent analysis of my flying. While he offered commentary that could sometimes be unflattering, the nightly debriefings had proved effective in helping me tweak my flying—and I felt I was doing better than ever.

We hadn't gone into the air again. Rig had taken out the ship's GravCaps and shields to disassemble and document them. It was work beyond my ability to help with, but I didn't mind, as I had the practices to keep me busy.

"You really do need help against bombers," M-Bot said to me. "You died or destroyed the city seventeen times today, while you were completely



successful only twice.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“I try to be helpful. I realize human memories are flawed and inconsistent.”

I sighed and walked out of the orchard, starting the more boring part of the trek home.

“The battles were interesting,” M-Bot said. “I’m . . . very glad that you lived through some of them.”

One foot after the other. Who would have thought that sitting in a box, moving only your hands, could be so tiring? My brain felt like it had been ripped out, clubbed to death by a barbarian, then stuffed back in upside down.

“You are very attractive and intelligent,” M-Bot said. “Spensa? Is my moral support subroutine functioning? Um, you’re quite bipedal. And very efficient at converting oxygen into carbon dioxide, an essential gas for plant life to—”

“I’m just tired, M-Bot. I’ve been through a lot today.”

“Nineteen battles! Though four of them were the same battle turned on a different axis and presented with a few distinct movement seeds for enemies.”

“Yeah, those are historical fights,” I said. “Like Cobb said . . .”

I halted.

“Spensa?” he asked. “I hear no more footfalls? Have you temporarily stopped being bipedal?”

“Historical battles,” I said, realizing something I should have put together long ago. “They have recordings of past battles?”

“They track all of their ships,” he said, “and have scanner records of enemy movements. I suspect they recreate these three-dimensional models for training and analysis.”

“Do you suppose . . . they have a record like that of the Battle of Alta? The fight where . . .”

Where my father had deserted.

“I’m sure they do somewhere,” M-Bot continued. “It’s the most important battle in the history of your people! The foundation of . . . Oh! Your father!”

“You can think at a thousand times the speed of a human brain,” I said, “but it took you that long to put together a simple fact?”

“I underclock conversations. If I focus my full efforts, it takes you several minutes in relative time to speak a single syllable.”

I supposed that made sense. “The record of my father’s battle. Can you . . . grab it? Show it to me?”

“I can only intercept what they’re actively broadcasting,” he said. “It seems that the DDF tries to minimize wireless communication, so as to not attract the attention of the eyes.”

“The what?” I asked.

“The eyes. I . . . I have no idea what that is. There’s a hole in my memory banks there. Huh.” The ship sounded genuinely confused. “I remember this quote: ‘Use physical cords for data transfer, avoid broadcasting, and put shielding around faster processors. To do otherwise risks the attention of the eyes.’ But that’s it. Curious . . .”

“So maybe our communications aren’t as primitive as you always say. Maybe they’re just being careful.” I started walking again. My pack felt so heavy, it could have been filled with spent shell casings.

“Either way,” M-Bot said, “I would guess there’s an archive somewhere on base. If they have a recording of the Battle of Alta, that would be the first place to check.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure whether to feel excited, or further bowed down, by the knowledge that I could theoretically *watch* my father’s last battle. See for myself if he’d actually deserted, and have . . . what? Proof?

I trudged onward, trying to decide if I was hungry enough to eat when I got to the cave, or if I was just going to collapse. As I neared the cavern, I saw the light flashing on my radio again.

I lifted it to my head. “I’m almost back, M-Bot. You can—”

“—general call to arms,” an operator said. “The admiral has called *all* pilots—cadets included—to base for possible deployment. Repeat: a seventy-five-ship Krell invasion has breached the debris field at 104.2-803-64000. All active pilots are instructed to assemble for a general call to arms. The admiral has called *all* pilots . . .”

I froze. I’d almost forgotten the original reason Cobb had given me a radio. But today? Of all days?

I could barely walk.

*Seventy-five ships?* Three-quarters of the Krell maximum flight capacity? Scud!

I pivoted, looking at the long hike back to Alta. Then, lethargically, I pushed myself into a jog.

I reached the DDF compound a sweaty, out-of-breath mess. Fortunately, my daily walks back and forth to my cave had been a good imitation of physical training, so I was in reasonable shape. The gate guards waved me through, and I forced myself into another jog. I stopped off at the changing rooms near the launchpad and threw on my flight suit.

I bolted out the door, running for my ship. My Poco sat alone. Nedd's ship had long since been assigned to another flight, and everyone else would be in the air already. The faint sound of AA guns popped in the distance, and burning streaks of falling debris indicated that this battlefield was dangerously close to Alta's defensive perimeter.

My fatigue was suddenly overpowered by a spike of concern. A pilot was climbing into the cockpit of my ship.

"Wait!" I shouted. "What are you doing? That's my ship!"

The pilot hesitated, glancing down at the ground crew who had been prepping the ship. One of them nodded.

The pilot climbed slowly back down the ladder.

"You're late," Dorgo—a man from the ground crew—said to me. "The admiral ordered all unoccupied ships manned and sent in as reserves."

My heart thundered inside my chest as the woman—reluctantly—hopped down and pulled off her helmet. She was in her early twenties, and bore a prominent scar across her forehead. She gave me a thumbs-up, but said nothing else as she trudged off toward the crew quarters.

"Who's that?" I asked softly.

"Callsign: Vigor," Dorgo said. "Former cadet who got shot down just before graduating. She was good enough that the admiral added her to the reserve roster."

“She ejected?” I asked.

Dorgo nodded.

I climbed up the ladder, then took my helmet from Dorgo, who climbed up after me. “Head to 110-75-1800,” he said, pointing toward the battlefield. “Unless you hear otherwise. That’s where your flight was told to hold position. I’ll let Flight Command know you’re up and off.”

“Thanks,” I said, pulling on the helmet, then strapping in.

He gave me a thumbs-up, then climbed down and pulled back the ladder. Another ground crew member waved with a blue flag once everyone was safely away.

I turned on the acclivity ring, then raised my ship. Eighteen hundred was a low altitude for fighting—we usually trained somewhere around 30,000. I felt like I was skimming the ground as I darted in the indicated direction.

“Skyward Ten,” I said, pressing the button to call Jorgen, “reporting in. Callsign: Spin.”

“You made it?” Jorgen replied. “They said they were going to send us a reservist.”

“It was a tight call,” I said, “but I convinced them *I* was the only one capable of giving you enough crap. You fighting?”

“No,” he said. “The admiral has us holding position near one of the AA guns. 110-75-1800, Spin. Glad to have you, crap and all.”

It took me around ten minutes to reach the position, where I spotted the other five members of my flight hovering between two large hills. I decelerated with a reverse burn, then fell into wingmate position by Hurl. Behind us, an enormous AA gun—longer than the flight school building, and then some—scanned the air for incoming Krell. A series of smaller guns sprouted from the base, ready to fire on low-flying ships.

A round of greetings from the others welcomed me. I could barely make out some flashes in the sky to mark the battlefield. The AA gun, however, let out a roaring blast behind us, shaking my Poco. Far overhead, a larger chunk of debris exploded into a shower of sparks and dust.

“So,” Hurl said in my ear, “how many kills you going to get today, Spin?”

“Well . . . the record in a single battle is held by callsign: Dodger. Twelve direct kills, nine assists. I figure it would be arrogant to try to beat that. So I’ll go for the tie.”

I expected a chuckle, but Hurl seemed serious when she said, “Twelve/nine? That doesn’t sound like so many.”

“Considering that most Krell incursion forces are around thirty ships?”

“There are seventy-five today,” Hurl said. “Easy pickings, if the DDF would let us actually fight.” She inched her Poco forward with maneuvering thrusters, and I followed.

“Where do you two think you’re going?” Jorgen asked.

“Just trying to get a better view of the battlefield,” I said.

“Yeah, belay that. Back into formation. Our orders are to hold position.”

We obeyed, but I found myself itching to get on with the battle. Sitting and waiting there, my fatigue kept bringing itself to my attention.

“Let’s call Cobb,” I said. “See if maybe we should send a pair of fighters out to scout the area.”

“I’m sure they have scouts working the field,” Jorgen said. “Hold position, Spin.”

“Hey, Arturo,” FM said over the line. “How far away is the main battle, do you suppose?”

“You’re asking me?” he replied.

“You’re the smart one.”

There was silence on the line for a moment.

“Well?” FM asked.

“Oh,” Arturo said. “Sorry. I was just . . . well, waiting for Nedd to make a wisecrack. I guess that’s still my instinct. Here, I can calculate the distance for you exactly.” A light flashed on our comm console. “Hey, Cobb. How far away is that fight?”

“About fifty klicks,” Cobb said. “Stay put, cadets. Victory Flight is almost up from the caverns, and they’ll relieve you once they come in.” His light flipped off.

“Great calculations there, Amphi,” FM said to Arturo.

“I consider it a mark of true intelligence to realize when someone else has already done your work for you,” he said. “That would make a good saying, right, Quirk? Will you use that one sometime?”

“Uh . . . bless your stars.”

“This isn’t fair,” Hurl said. “We should be fighting. We’re hardly cadets anymore, and I’m tired of simulations. Right, Spin?”

Off in the distance, flashes of light marked where men and women were dying. Losing friends, like I had.

I hated that this creeping, insidious worry had somehow infiltrated my heart. This hesitance, this *fear*. It was stronger today, probably because I was tired. Maybe if I could get out into the fight, I could prove myself . . . to myself.

“Yeah, Hurl’s right,” I answered. “We should be killing Krell, not killing time.”

“We do as we’re *ordered*,” Jorgen said. “And we don’t debate with our commanders. I find it remarkable how you can claim to hardly be cadets anymore, when you have yet to grasp something so fundamental as command structure.”

I bit my lip, then felt my face go warm with embarrassment. He was right. Stupid Jerkface.

I forced myself to wait for our replacements. They’d be one of the reserve flights, hangared—starfighters and all—down in the deep caverns. It was a careful balance; we couldn’t risk a blast wiping out the entire DDF by destroying Alta. But any ships we didn’t keep on immediate call took time to retrieve via the vehicle elevators.

Eventually, Cobb’s line flashed back on. I stifled a sigh. Truth be told, we weren’t in any shape to fight today—not after that long spent training. I prepared myself to turn and go back.

“Krell squadron,” Cobb said. “Eight ships.”

*What?*

“At heading 125-111-1000,” Cobb continued. “One of our scouting pairs caught them sneaking in at low altitude. Flight-leader, your backup is still five to ten away. You’ll need to engage.”

Engage.

“Understood, Flight Command,” Jorgen said.

“These are standard Krell interceptors, best the scouts could tell,” Cobb said. “Admiral’s orders are for you to get close, visually confirm that there isn’t a bomber among them. Then destroy or drive back any fighters.

“AA guns will wait on standby; shooting into combat is a good way to get our own people killed. But if you can IMP any fighters that escape you, the small AA guns should be able to handle them. And if you can lure any enemy high enough, the large gun might be able to pick them off.” Cobb paused. “I’m patching your ships into the general battle chatter. Good luck, cadets. Listen to your flightleader; remember your training. This one is for real.”

The light clicked off.

“Finally!” Hurl said.

“I want a wide sweep formation,” Jorgen said to us. “You heard the heading. 125-111-1000. This is going to be close to the ground. Watch your relative elevation. Let’s move!”

We fell into a wide formation, in wingmate pairs. Me and Hurl, Jorgen and Arturo, FM and Kimmalyn. We sped through the gap between the two peaks, rounding to the east, along the indicated heading. We caught the visuals almost immediately—eight Krell ships flying in a U shape.

“We’re yours, flightleader,” a woman’s voice said on the general channel. “Val-class. Ranger Seven, callsign: Cloak.”

“Ranger Eight, callsign: Underscore,” a male voice added.

Val-class. Those would be the two scout ships; I couldn’t pick them out yet, but they’d join the fight with us.

My fatigue melted away in the face of my excitement. It was happening. A real fight. Not an accidental engagement, but actual orders to bring down an enemy squadron.

“Thanks for your help, scouts,” Jorgen said. “We’re ordered to get visual confirmation on the status of a bomber among these fellows. Ranger pair, I want you to coordinate that to Flight Command. My Pocos will run a scatter formation and try to break the enemy apart into individuals. Focus your attention on making sure we’ve identified each ship.”

“Confirmed,” Cloak said.

“All right, team,” Jorgen said. “Overburn to Mag-3, then once we engage, drop to dogfighting speeds. Free-for-all, take what you can, and watch your wingmate.” He breathed out. “Stars guard you.”

“And you, flightleader,” Arturo said.

They both sounded worried. My resolve wavered. Which I hated. I was *not* going to become a coward.

“Go!” Jorgen said.

“Yeah!” Hurl yelped, and hit her overburn.

I followed, tearing through the sky in a sudden acceleration toward the enemy. Exactly as in the simulations, the Krell scattered when directly engaged. They didn’t worry about covering their wingmates; they counted on their superior ships to compensate for our superior coordination.

I hugged Hurl’s left rear. We pulled out of overburn at high speed and banked right, picking a specific Krell ship to target. We’d moved into a



debris fall, but it was mostly small chunks that were burning up high overhead. The occasional midsize piece dropped past us, trailing smoke, but none were big enough for light-lance maneuvers.

We fell to fighting speeds and stuck to our target. I held back just far enough to be outside range if Hurl fired her IMP. Two Val-class starfighters—designed for scanner avoidance and speed—swooped in overhead. They wouldn't have much in the way of firepower.

"Cloak," I said, flipping a button. "This is Skyward Ten, call-sign: Spin. The ship I'm chasing is a regular Krell interceptor."

"Confirmed," Cloak said. I didn't hear the rest of the chatter; the others would be reporting individually. Hopefully, the two scouts could keep track enough to identify each ship.

Hurl and I swept along the ground, dodging right, then left as we passed into a large crater. Hurl hit overburn to try to get close enough to IMP, but overshot as the Krell turned upward.

I stayed on it, and Hurl cursed softly, falling in behind me. "We don't have any tails, Spin. Let's bring that bucket down before it gets help."

"Confirmed." I kept my attention on the enemy. Yes . . . single-minded focus. My helmet sensors—which I mostly ignored these days—grew warm. I felt like I could anticipate the Krell's turns as it zipped out of the crater and banked right.

Focus. Nothing else mattered. No worries. No fear. Just me, my ship, and the target.

Closer.

Closer.

*Almost.*

"Guys! Help!"

Kimmalyn.

I cursed, my concentration breaking. There she was, being chased by three tails. Scud! FM curved around behind, trying to get into position to offer her support.

I broke off my chase, and Hurl followed as we rushed toward Kimmalyn. "Covering fire," I said, and the two of us opened up with destructors, spraying enough fire that the three tails went into defensive maneuvers and let Kimmalyn escape.

"Thanks," FM said, falling in beside Kimmalyn. I took the time to spot Arturo and Jorgen engaged in a dogfight with three Krell. With that much

heat on them, they wouldn't dare use an IMP and leave themselves exposed.

"We need to pick off some strays," I said to Hurl, "and bring the odds in our favor."

"Right," she said. "At your three. Look good?"

"Go for it," I said, following her as we swooped toward another Krell. It looked identical to the one we'd been chasing—that same shape with wires trailing at the rear. It didn't appear that any of these were bombers.

I radioed in what we'd seen, and then we chased the ship out away from the main firefight. When it tried to cut left to circle around, I was able to overburn and drive it back. Isolated, it tried to simply outrun us on the straight, accelerating to Mag-3, then Mag-4.

"I'm going in!" Hurl said. Her booster flared into overburn, and she roared forward.

I was already anticipating her. We'd done this together so many times in the last week that I knew, by instinct, exactly how it would go. In a perfect maneuver, she got in just close enough and hit her IMP. With a flash of blue, her shield went down, and so did the Krell's.

I weaved past as she slowed, then I unleashed my destructors. It was almost a surprise when the Krell ship exploded into molten bits. It had actually *worked*!

Hurl whooped as we both slowed down. I pivoted and came back to cover her while she reignited her shield. A piece of space debris careened past me, exploding with a soft blast when it impacted not far below.

"Is that first blood?" I said, hitting a button. "Jorgen, we got one!"

"Congrats," he said, his voice tense.

I scanned the rest of the battle. He and Arturo were still dealing with three ships—and the scouts had managed to chase one off in the other direction, trying a maneuver similar to what Hurl and I had done. That meant . . .

Three ships, chasing Kimmalyn. *Again.*

"Scud," I said. "Hurl?"

"Go. I'm almost reignited."

I hit overburn, heading back toward the main battle.

"Guys?" Kimmalyn asked. "*Guys?*"

"I'm on you," FM said. "I'm on you . . ."

FM managed to chase off the ships, but another looped around to get behind her. When she went into a dodge, one of the three original ships

went back on Kimmalyn.

Kimmalyn dodged erratically, and I could imagine her panicking. She wasn't picking a strategy and sticking to it; she basically just tried every dodging pattern, one after another.

I accelerated, but destructor fire flashed all around Kimmalyn, and her shield crackled, taking a hit. She went in and out of over-burn.

*I'm not going to catch her. Not in time.*

"Quirk, hang on!" I said over the general line. "I'm going to try something. FM, everyone, if you can disengage and follow me—try to do so. Make a regular V with me on point."

I turned toward the ship chasing FM—which was much closer to me than the ones on Kimmalyn. I didn't fire, but instead swept around it in a loop, coming centimeters from the ground, sending up a cloud of dust. I then bolted upward and used my light-lance to grab a small chunk of space debris. In a hard turn, I pivoted and launched it up toward Kimmalyn's chaser. It passed impressively close to one of the Krell.

I pulled out of my loop, and FM fell in behind me. Jorgen and Arturo broke off their engagement for a moment and did likewise.

"What is this for?" Jorgen asked over the line. "What are we doing?"

"Saving Quirk," I said. Hopefully.

It depended on whether my theory was right. Tense, I turned upward and hit my overburn. For a brief moment, we held the formation.

Above, the Krell chasing Kimmalyn broke off and turned downward—toward me.

"Cobb warned that the Krell try to destroy our command structure," I said. "They take out flightleaders first, if they can identify them, and—"

Destructor fire sprayed around me.

Right.

I pulled into the most complex set of dodging loops I knew, the Barrett sequence. An impressive *four* Krell found their way to chasing me. That protected Kimmalyn—but four was more than I could handle. Each time I tried to pull upward or break away, a ship or two managed to cut me off. My Poco rattled as I spun and dodged, and destructors hit my shields.

*Scud. Scud. Scud!*

"I'm coming, Spin," Hurl said. "Hang on."

I kept dodging, destructors narrowly missing me. A part of my brain registered Arturo downing a Krell ship. How long had we been fighting?

Had we really only shot down two? Where were those reinforcements?

“More ships,” Jorgen said.

“Finally,” I said with a grunt as I banked.

“Not ours. Theirs.”

My turn took me straight into them—another flight of six Krell interceptors. I spun through them, and somehow avoided colliding with any. In the chaos, I finally managed to get some altitude.

My little trick must have really convinced them I was important, because three stuck on me—firing full out—as I screamed into the air. My proximity sensors blared, and my shields—

A shot hit me, causing my shield to crackle, then go out. Warning lights lit up all over my control panel.

I continued straight up, rotating my acclivity ring so it pointed down behind my ship. I just had to gain enough height—

An explosion flashed behind me. The shock wave rocked my unshielded Poco. I breathed a quiet prayer to whichever gunner was manning those AA guns when—in another enormous blast—a second Krell ship vanished from my proximity sensors.

The last Krell ship broke off, diving out of range. I leaned back against my seat, sweating, head pounding, lights flashing on my console. Alive. I was alive.

“Hurl!” FM said over the line. “What are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” Hurl said with a grunt. “I’m going to get this one. The shields are almost down.”

I quickly rotated my ship, tipping to see the battlefield alive with action beneath. Kimmalyn—I was pretty sure it was her—had flown upward after me, to get out of range. The rest of the battle was a mess of Krell ships and destructor fire.

*There.* I spotted Hurl chasing an enemy while being tailed by a swarm of three Krell. I’d been forced to leave her without a wingmate.

I ignored my blinking shield light—no time to reignite—and dove back down toward the battlefield. I unleashed destructor fire toward Hurl’s tails, but I was too far away and my shots were way off. The enemy didn’t break from their chase.

Hurl took a hit. And another.

“Hurl, pull up!” I said.

“I’ve almost got him. We’re never going to break any records by being cowards.” She fired, scoring the shields of the Krell in front of her.

I hit overburn, tearing after them. But dives were dangerous on the body, and as soon as my GravCaps cut, I felt the g-forces in my eyes, forcing the blood up into my head.

I gritted my teeth, vision going red as I reached the group of Krell. I hit my IMP by touch. It couldn’t take down my shield, after all. It was already gone.

I didn’t see how many of them I caught. I was too close to doing myself permanent harm. I leveled out, my head pounding, my eyes aching. As my vision returned, I started my shield reignition and craned my head, trying to search for Hurl. Was she safe?

“I’m taking heavy fire!” Arturo said. “I need help!”

“Reinforcements are here!” Jorgen said.

Everything was chaos. I could barely comprehend the mess, though for the moment—remarkably—nobody seemed to be targeting me.

An explosion flashed off to my right.

“Got him!” Hurl said.

*There.* Hurl had shot down her target—but two Krell ships were still tailing her.

“Pull up, Hurl!” I said. “You’ve still got tails. Get up into the range of the AA guns!”

She turned upward, listening—finally. Two ships chased her. I ignited my shield, then turned after her, trying to help, but I’d lost a lot of ground.

“Shields down,” Hurl said with a grunt.

“Quirk!” I said, desperate, flying—too far away—toward my friend. “Pick them off. I IMPed that group. Their shields are down too. Fire!”

“I . . .” Kimmalyn sounded rattled. “I . . .”

“You can do it, Quirk! Just like in the sims. Come on!”

A flash of light from a charged destructor sliced the air above us, firing toward the ships tailing Hurl.

And missed.

Hurl took a hit a second later, and her wing exploded, scattering pieces. The blue glow underneath her ship started to flash, the light flickering.

No . . .

Hurl’s ship plummeted. From a distance, she was like any other piece of debris.

“Hurl!” I screamed. “Eject! Get out!”

“I . . .” Her voice was soft; I could barely hear it through the warnings going off on her dash and mine. “I can control it . . . I can steer . . .”

“Your acclivity ring is damaged!” I said. “You’re losing altitude. Eject!”

“*Not. A. Coward,*” she said. “*Brave to the—*”

A flash of light.

A small explosion on the ground, insignificant in the storm of destruction that was the battlefield.

“Pull out!” Jorgen said. “Everyone, *pull out now!* Leave this fight to the full pilots. We have orders to retreat!”

*Hurl . . .*

I couldn’t move at first. I just stared at where she’d hit the ground.

“Spin,” Jorgen said. When had he flown in beside me? “We have to go. We’re too exhausted for this fight. Can you hear me?”

Blinking back tears, I whispered, “Yes.” I fell into position behind him as we dove and skimmed the surface to escape the battlefield.

We pulled up next to FM and Arturo, and I gasped. Arturo’s ship was blackened all along its left wing and side, its canopy cracked. His acclivity ring was still on, so he could stay in the air, but . . . scud. He’d survived a destructor hit after his shield had been knocked out.

When he called in, his voice was subdued, rattled. He seemed to know how lucky he was to have survived.

Hurl though . . .

Kimmalyn finally came sweeping down to join us.

“. . . Hurl?” FM asked.

“She went down,” Kimmaly said. “I . . . I was watching. I tried, but . . .”

“She wouldn’t eject,” I said softly. “She refused.”

“Let’s get back,” Jorgen said. Another flight of reinforcements arrived at the battlefield. As I watched them, any confidence I’d had in my abilities evaporated. Those fighters worked far more efficiently than we had, banking and flying as teams, coordinating in sharp motions.

I suddenly felt I’d need hundreds more hours of practice before I was ready. If I would ever be ready. I wiped away tears as Jorgen’s voice, soft but firm, ordered us to accelerate to Mag-3.

As we flew, my hands shook—revealing me for the coward I was.

## 33

I woke up in a room.

A room? Not M-Bot's cockpit?

I sat up, my muscles aching, my head pounding. I was *inside*. In a *bed*. What had happened? Had I fallen asleep somewhere on DDF grounds? The admiral would—

*You're in the infirmary. I remembered. After the battle. Cobb sent you here to be checked over. They ordered you to sleep and undergo observation.*

I vaguely remembered objecting, but the nurse had forced me into a hospital gown, then had ordered me into bed in a small, empty room. I'd been too numb to object. I didn't even remember lying down; it was all a haze.

I *did* distinctly remember the flash as Hurl's ship impacted the ground. I lay back against a too-soft pillow, squeezing my eyes shut. Hurl was gone.

Eventually I forced myself out of bed. I found my things on a stool: my jumpsuit, laundered, sitting with my light-line bracelet on top of it. My pack rested on the floor beside it, and the radio at the side was blinking. Scud . . . what if someone had answered that? Would M-Bot have been able to keep quiet?

My secrets suddenly seemed insignificant. In the face of what was happening . . . the horror of our flight slowly being consumed one by one . . . Who cared? Who *cared* if they found out my secrets?

Hurl was dead.

I checked the clock. 0545. I found the restroom, where I cleansed. I went back to my little room and dressed, then walked out to the hospital's front desk. A nurse looked me over, then handed me a red ticket.

*Medical leave for loss recovery. Orders: one week.* It was imprinted with my name, stamped and signed.

“I can’t,” I said. “The admiral will kick me out of—”

“Your entire flight has been given mandatory medical leave,” the woman said. “On orders from Dr. Thior, head of medical. You won’t be kicked out of anything, cadet. You need a rest.”

I stared at the ticket.

“Go home,” the woman said. “Spend a week with your family and recover. Stars above . . . they push you cadets too hard.”

I stood there for a moment before I turned and walked out, dully meandering toward the training building. I took the roundabout way, past our Pocos. Four in a line. Arturo’s ship was off to the side in a little maintenance hangar, with pieces scattered along the ground.

Go home. Where? To live in my cave? Back down to my mother, whose disapproval of the DDF might finally make me lose the rest of my nerve?

I crumpled the leave ticket in my pocket and walked to our classroom, where I sat down in my seat alone. I really just wanted to think, to talk to Cobb, to sort through all of this. Hurl had said . . . brave to the end. And she had been.

*Scud.* Hurl was *gone*. In Gran-Gran’s stories they held feasts in honor of the fallen. But I didn’t want to feast. I wanted to crawl somewhere dark and curl up.

Strangely, as class time approached, the door creaked open and the others—except for Jorgen—arrived in a solemn, quiet group. Hadn’t the nurse said we *all* had leave? Perhaps they, like me, didn’t want to accept it.

Kimmalyn stopped by my seat and gave me a hug. I didn’t want a hug, but I took it. I needed it.

Even Jorgen arrived about ten minutes after class normally began. “I thought I might find you all here,” he said.

I braced myself for him to tell us to go. For him to toe the official line and tell us class was canceled because we were on forced leave.

Instead he inspected us, then nodded in an approving way. “Skyward Flight, line up,” he said in a soft voice. He hadn’t tried that since the first day, when we’d ignored him. Today though, it felt right. We four got up and stood in a row.

Jorgen walked to the classroom intercom and pushed one of the buttons. “Jax, will you send to Captain Cobb and tell him his flight is waiting for



him, in their usual room? Thank you.”

Jorgen then walked over and joined us in line. Together, we waited. Fifteen after. Twenty after. It was 0729 before Cobb slammed open the door and limped in.

We snapped to attention and saluted.

He looked at us, then roared, “*SIT DOWN!*”

I started. That wasn’t what I had expected. Still, along with the others, I jumped to obey.

“If you are in an uncontrolled descent,” he shouted at us, his face coloring, “then you *eject*! You hear me! You *scudding EJECT*!”

He was angry. Like, *actually* angry. He pretended to be angry sometimes, but it was nothing like this: red-faced, spitting as he shouted.

“How many times did I say this?” he said. “How many times did I give you orders? And still you buy into that nonsense?” He waved his hand out the window, toward the large DDF high command building. “The only reason we have this stupid culture of self-martyrdom is because *somebody* feels they have to justify our casualties. To make them seem honorable, righteous.

“It’s neither one. And you’re fools for listening to them. Don’t you throw your lives away. Don’t you *dare* be like that idiot yesterday. Don’t you—”

“Don’t call her an idiot,” I snapped. “She was trying to fly a controlled crash. She was trying to save her ship.”

“She was scared of being called a coward!” Cobb bellowed. “It *had nothing to do with the ship!*”

“Hurl—Hudiya—was a *hero*.” I glared at him.

“She was a—”

I stood up. “Simply because you want to justify your cowardice in ejecting doesn’t mean *we* have to do the same!”

Cobb froze. Then he kind of . . . deflated. He sank down into the seat by his desk. He didn’t seem wise, or even grizzled. Just . . . old, tired, and sad.

I immediately felt embarrassed. Cobb didn’t deserve that; he hadn’t done anything wrong in ejecting, and even the DDF didn’t blame him. And Hurl, well, *I’d* told her to eject. I’d practically *begged* her to.

But she hadn’t. And we had to respect her choice, didn’t we?

“You’re all on medical leave for a week,” Cobb said. “Dr. Thior has been pushing to give more leave to flights once they lose members, and it looks like she’s started to get her way.” He stood up and stared right at me. “I

hope you enjoy being a hero when your corpse is rotting like your friend's, alone in a wasteland, forgotten and ignored."

"She'll be given a pilot's burial," I said. "Her name will be sung for generations."

He snorted. "If they had to sing the name of every fool cadet who died on her way to pilot, we'd never have time for anything else. And Hurl's corpse isn't going to be recovered for at least several weeks. The scouts confirmed that the crash destroyed her ship's acclivity ring beyond recovery. There's nothing on that Poco worth salvage priority, not considering that big wreck we're still working on.

"So your heroic friend will be left out there—another dead pilot buried by the slag of her own explosion. Scud. I have to go write a letter to her parents and explain why. I can't trust what Ivans will say."

He hobbled toward the door, but stopped and turned toward Kimmalyn. I hadn't noticed that she'd stood up. She saluted him, eyes teary. Then she dropped something on her seat.

Her cadet's pin.

Cobb nodded. "Keep the pin, Quirk," he told her. "You're dismissed with whatever honors matter to you."

He turned and left.

Dismissed? *Dismissed*? "He can't do that to you!" I demanded, turning toward Kimmalyn.

She wilted. "I asked for it after the battle. He told me to think about it overnight. And I did."

"But . . . you can't . . ."

Jorgen stepped up beside me, confronting Kimmalyn. "Spin is right, Quirk. You're an important member of this flight."

"The weakest member," Kimmalyn said. "How many times has one of you had to pull out of a fight to come and save me? I'm putting you all in danger." Contrary to what Cobb had said, she left her pin on her seat as she walked toward the door.

"Kimmalyn," I said, feeling helpless. I rushed after her and took her hand. "Please."

"I got her killed, Spin," she whispered. "You know that as well as I do."

"She got herself killed."

"The one shot that mattered. *That's* the one I missed."

“There were two ships chasing her. One shot, even if it had hit, might not have been enough.”

She smiled, squeezed my hand, then left.

I felt my world collapsing. First Hurl, now Kimmalyn. I looked toward Jorgen. Surely he could stop this. Couldn't he?

He stood stiffly, tall, with that too-handsome face. He stared straight ahead, and I thought I could see something in his eyes. Guilt? Pain?

*He's watching his flight break apart around him too.*

I had to do something. Make *some* kind of sense out of this disaster, and of my pain. But no, I couldn't—*wouldn't*—stop Kimmalyn. At least . . . at least she'd be safe this way.

Hurl though . . .

“Arturo,” I said, picking up my pack, “about how far out was that battle, would you say?”

“Pretty close to our original position, beyond the AA guns. Say, eighty clicks.”

I shouldered my pack. “Great. I'll see you all in a week.”

“Where are you going?” FM asked.

“I'm going to find Hurl,” I said, “and give her a pilot's burial.”

I trudged across the dry, dusty ground. My compass kept me on the right heading, which was important, because everything looked the same out here on the surface.

I tried not to think. Thinking was dangerous. I'd barely known Bim and Morningtide, and their deaths had left me shaken for weeks. Hurl had been my *wingmate*.

It was more though. She'd been like me. At least, like I pretended to be. She was usually one step ahead of me, leading the charge.

In her death, I saw myself.

*No. No thinking.*

That didn't stop the emotions. The hole inside, the pain of a wound rubbed raw. After this, nothing could ever be the same. Yesterday hadn't just marked the death of a friend. It marked the death of my ability to pretend this war was—in *any* way—glorious.

My radio was blinking. I hit the switch.

"Spensa?" M-Bot asked. "Are you certain this journey is wise? I am not capable of worry, mind you, but—"

"I'd rather be alone," I said. "I'll call you tomorrow or something." I clicked the radio off and stuffed it inside my backpack, where I'd stashed some rat meat and water for the journey. If it wasn't enough, I could go hunting. Maybe I'd vanish into the caverns, never to return. Become a nomad, like my clan before the founding of Alta.

*And never fly again?*

*Just walk, Spensa.* I told myself. *Stop thinking and walk.*

This was simple.

This I could do.

I was about two hours outside Alta when a sound broke the quiet and I turned to see a hovercar approaching. It flew three meters off the ground and towed a wake of dust behind. Had someone warned the admiral? Had she sent MPs with some made-up reason why I couldn't be out here?

No . . . As it got closer I realized I recognized that blue car. It was Jorgen's. He must have gotten the power matrix replaced.

I grunted, then turned forward and kept walking. He pulled up beside me and lowered his car so that his head was barely a meter above mine.

"Spin? Are you really planning to *walk* eighty clicks?"

I didn't reply.

"You realize it's dangerous out here," Jorgen said. "I should order you back. What if you get caught in a debris fall?"

I shrugged. I'd been living near the surface for months, and had only really been in danger that one time—when I'd discovered M-Bot's cave.

"Spensa," Jorgen said. "For the North Star's sake, get in. I'll drive you."

"Don't you have some fancy rich-person event you need to be attending?"

"My parents don't know about the medical leave yet. For a little while, I'm as free as you are."

*Me? Free?* I wanted to laugh in his face.

Still, he had a car. This would transform a multiday trip into one that would last a few hours. I resented him for giving me the option, as I'd wanted to be on my own. To suffer, perhaps. But a part of me knew I wouldn't reach Hurl's body with what I had in my pack. I'd probably be forced to turn back after a day of hiking.

"I *want* to go with you," Jorgen said. "It's a good idea. Hurl . . . deserves this. I brought some materials for the pyre."

*Stop being right, Jorgen.* I thought. But I walked around the car and climbed into the passenger side. I had dust up to my thighs, which I smeared all over the car's interior, but he didn't seem to notice.

He pushed on the car's throttle, sending us darting across the landscape. The car had a small acclivity ring, and no booster, just basic thrusters—but being so close to the ground, I felt like we were going faster than we really were. Particularly with no roof and the wind blowing my hair.

I let the motion transfix me.

"Do you want to talk?" Jorgen asked.

I didn't reply. I didn't have anything to say.

“A good flightleader is supposed to be able to help his flight with their problems,” he said. “You couldn’t have saved her, Spin. There’s nothing you could have done.”

“You think she should have pulled out,” I said.

“I . . . That’s not relevant now.”

“You think she shouldn’t have gone for that kill. You think she disobeyed protocol, and shouldn’t have flown off on her own. You’re thinking it. I know you are. You’re judging her.”

“So now you’re angry at me for things I *might* be thinking?”

“Were you thinking them? *Were* you judging her?”

Jorgen didn’t say anything. He kept driving, wind blowing in his too-neat, too-perfect hair.

“Why do you have to be so stiff all the time?” I asked. “Why does your way of ‘helping’ always sound like you’re quoting from some manual? Are you some kind of thinking machine? Do you actually *care*?”

He winced, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I knew he cared. I’d seen him that morning in the classroom, trying to find a way to save Morningtide in the simulation. Over and over.

My words were stupid. Thoughtless.

Which was exactly what I got for not thinking.

“Why do you put up with me?” I asked. I opened my eyes and leaned my head back, staring at the debris field high overhead. “Why didn’t you turn me in for vandalizing your car, or assaulting you, or a dozen other things?”

“You saved Nedd’s life.”

I tipped my head and looked at Jorgen. He was driving with his eyes fixed straight forward.

“You followed my friend into the belly of a beast,” he continued. “And you towed him by his collar to safety. Even before that, I knew. You’re insubordinate, mouthy, and . . . well, you’re scudding frustrating. But when you fly, Spin, you fly as part of a team—and you keep my people safe.”

He looked at me, met my eyes. “You can swear at me all you want, threaten me, whatever. So long as you fly like you did yesterday, protecting the others, I want you on my team.”

“Hurl still died,” I said. “Kimmalyn still left.”

“Hurl died because of her recklessness. Quirk left because she felt inadequate. Those problems, like your insubordination, are my fault. It’s *my* job to keep my flight in line.”

“Well, if they’re handing you impossible jobs, why don’t they just ask you to defeat the Krell all on your own? Seems about as likely to happen as you wrangling the lot of us . . .”

He stiffened, eyes forward, and I realized he’d taken it as an insult. Scud.

We eventually passed the AA-gun battery, and Jorgen called them to prevent their proximity warnings from going off. They let him go without question, once he mentioned who he was—the son of a First Citizen.

After the AA guns, it was surprisingly easy to locate Hurl’s wreckage. She’d skidded some hundred or more meters, gouging the dusty earth with a wide scar. The ship had broken into three big chunks. The rear of the fuselage, with the booster, had apparently ripped off first. As we drove along, we found where the middle of the fuselage—what was left of it—had made a large black mark on the ground. The power matrix had exploded after hitting some rocks, and had destroyed the acclivity ring. That was the flash I’d seen.

But a small chunk of the front fuselage—with the cockpit—had broken free and skidded on farther. My heart leaped as I spotted the bent remnants of the cockpit crushed up against a pile of large boulders ahead.

Jorgen landed the hovercar, and I scrambled out, dashing ahead of him. I jumped onto the first of the rocks, then heaved myself up onto another, scraping my fingers. I needed to get high enough to see into the crushed cockpit. I had to know. I pulled myself up to a higher boulder, where I could look down into the broken canopy.

She was there.

A part of me hadn’t believed she would be. A part of me had hoped that Hurl had somehow pulled herself from the wreckage—that she was walking back, battered but alive. Self-assured as always.

That was a fantasy. Her pressure suit reported vitals, and we all had emergency transmitters to activate if we needed rescuing. If Hurl had survived, the DDF would have known. One glimpse confirmed that she’d probably died at the first impact. She was crushed—pinned inside the mangled metal of the cockpit.

I tore my gaze away, cold flooding my chest. Pain. Emptiness. I looked back along the scar in the ground her ship had made while crashing. That long swath seemed to indicate that she’d managed to get her ship horizontal at the end, that she’d gotten close to a gliding position.

So she'd almost done it. With a blown-off wing and a broken acclivity ring, she'd *still* almost landed.

Jorgen grunted as he tried to climb up. I gave him a hand, but sometimes I forgot how small I was compared to someone like him. He nearly pulled me right off with a casual jerk of his arm.

He scrambled onto the rock beside me, then took a quick glance at Hurl. He went pale and turned aside, settling down on an upper portion of a boulder. I set my jaw, then forced myself to climb into the cockpit and pull Hurl's pin off her bloodied flight suit. The least we could do was return that to her family.

I looked at Hurl's lacerated face, her one remaining eye staring ahead. Defiant until the end, for all the good it had done. Brave . . . cowardly . . . she was still dead, so what did it matter?

Feeling like a terrible friend for those thoughts, I closed her eye, then climbed out and wiped my hands on my jumpsuit.

Jorgen nodded toward the car. "I've got the things for the pyre in the trunk."

I let myself down with my light-line, and he followed. In the trunk of the vehicle, we found some oil and a bundle of wood, which surprised me. I'd been expecting coal. He really *was* rich if he had this on hand. We climbed back to the ship, then pulled the bundle up after us with my light-line.

We started packing the wood into the cockpit, piece by piece. "This is how our ancestors used to do it," Jorgen said as he worked. "Burn the ship, out on the ocean."

I nodded, wondering how little he thought of my education, if he assumed I didn't know that. Neither of us had ever seen an ocean, of course. Detritus didn't have them.

I poured oil onto the wood and the body, then stepped back, and Jorgen handed me the lighter. I lit a small stick, then tossed it into the canopy.

The sudden intensity of the flames took me by surprise, and sweat prickled my brow. The two of us retreated farther, and eventually climbed onto one of the higher boulders.

By tradition, we saluted the flames. "Return to the stars," Jorgen said—the officer's part. "Sail them well, warrior."

It wasn't the whole elegy, but it was enough. We settled down on the rocks, to watch—by tradition—until the fire went out. I rubbed Hurl's pin, bringing back the gleam.



"I'm not defiant," Jorgen said.

"What? I thought you grew up in the deep caverns."

"I mean, I'm Defiant—I'm from the Defiant caverns. But I don't *feel* defiant. I don't know how to be like you. And Hurl. Since I was little, everything has been scheduled for me. How am I supposed to follow the grand speeches—defying the Krell, defying our doom—when everything I do has seven rules attached to it?"

"At least it got you flight lessons and free entry into the DDF. At least you can fly."

He shrugged. "Six months."

"Excuse me?"

"That's how long I get after graduation, Spin. They put me in Cobb's class because it's supposed to be the safest for cadets—and once I graduate, I'm to fly for six months. At that point, I'll have enough of a record as a pilot to be respected by my peers, so my family will pull me out."

"They can *do* that?"

"Yeah. They'll probably make it look like a family emergency—a need for me to step into my government position sooner than anticipated. The rest of my life will be spent in meetings, interfacing on behalf of my father with the DDF."

"Will you . . . ever get to fly?"

"I suppose I could go up for fun. But how could it compare to flying a real starfighter in battle? How could I go out for joyrides—a few calculated and protected moments—when I've had something so much greater?" He glanced up at the sky. "My father always worried that I liked flying too much. To be honest, during my practices—before I started official training—I thought a pair of wings might let me escape his legacy. But I'm not defiant. I'll do what's expected of me."

"Huh," I said softly.

"What?"

"Nobody calls *your* father a coward. Yet . . . you do still live in his shadow." Somehow, Jorgen was trapped as soundly as I was. All his merits couldn't buy him freedom.

Together we watched the embers of the pyre die as the sky grew darker, the ancient skylights dimming. We shared a few thoughts of Hurl—though we had both missed out on her nightly dinnertime antics, and had only heard of them secondhand.

“She was like me,” I finally said as the fire grew cold and the hour late. “More me than I am, these days.”

Jorgen didn’t press me on that. He just nodded, and by this light—a few embers of the fire reflecting in his eyes—his face didn’t seem quite as punchable as it always had before. Maybe because I could read the emotions behind that mask of authoritarian perfection.

When the last light of the fire went out, we stood and saluted again. Jorgen then climbed down to his car, explaining he needed to check in with his family. I stood on the high rock, looking again along the gouge that Hurl’s crash had caused.

Did I blame her for wasting her life? Or did I respect her for refusing—at all costs—to be branded a coward? Could I feel both at once?

*She really did almost make it.* I thought, noting the nearly undamaged wing lying nearby. And farther back, the rear end of the fuselage. Ripped off, sitting on its own.

Booster included.

I felt a sudden spike of realization. It would be weeks before anyone came to scavenge this wreckage. And if they did wonder where the booster went, they’d probably assume it blew off in the initial destructor hit.

If I could somehow get it to my cave . . .

It wouldn’t be robbing the dead. Scud, Hurl would *tell* me to take the booster. She’d want me to fly and fight. But how in the world would I get it all the way back? A booster would be orders of magnitude heavier than I could lift . . .

I looked toward Jorgen, sitting in his car. Did I dare?

Did I have any other choice? I *had* seen some chains in the trunk when we’d been unloading the wood . . .

I climbed down from the rocks and headed toward the car, walking up right as he was turning off the radio. “No emergencies yet,” he said. “But we should get going.”

I debated for a moment before finally asking. “Jorgen, how much can this car lift?”

“A fair amount. Why?”

“Are you willing to do something that sounds a little crazy?”

“Like flying out and giving our own funeral to one of our friends?”

“*More* crazy,” I said. “But I need you to do it, and not ask too many questions. Pretend I’m insane with grief or something.”

He looked at me, carefully. “What is it, exactly, that you want to do?”

“You realize,” Jorgen said as we flew back toward Alta, “I’m starting to get *very* suspicious.”

I looked over the side to where the booster dangled from the bottom of his hovercar, connected by chains to the tow ring on the underside of the chassis. His car’s small acclivity ring had been barely enough to lift the weight.

“First you steal my power matrix,” Jorgen said, “now this. What are you doing? Building your own Poco?” He laughed.

When I didn’t join in, he looked at me. Then he put the heel of his palm to his forehead, rubbing it as understanding sank in. “You are. You’re building a starfighter.”

“I told you not to ask too many questions.”

“And I never agreed. Spin, you’re *building* a *ship*?”

“Repairing,” I said. “I found a wreck.”

“All salvage belongs to the DDF. Claiming it is the same as stealing.”

“Like you just helped me steal a booster?”

He groaned and leaned back.

“What did you *think* we were doing?” I asked, amused. “We spent half an hour pulling a chunk of salvage from the ground!”

“You told me to assume you were emotionally unstable because of Hurl’s death!”

“I didn’t expect you to *believe* me,” I said. “Look, I’ve done this forever without getting into trouble. Down in Igneous, I used salvage to build my own speargun for hunting.”

“An entire fighter is different from a speargun. How are you planning to fix the thing? You don’t have the expertise for that—or the time!”

I didn't reply; no need to get Rig into trouble.

"You're insane," he said.

"Admiral Ironsides won't let me fly. She's got a grudge against me because of my father. Even if I graduate, I'll spend my life grounded."

"So you build your own ship? What do you think is going to happen? That you'll show up on a battlefield in the nick of time, and everyone will simply *forget* to ask where you got your own *scudding* starfighter?"

I . . . honestly didn't have a response to that. I'd shoved logic aside, figuring questions like that were bridges to be burned once I captured them.

"Spin, even assuming you could fix a crashed Poco yourself—you can't, by the way—the first time you took the thing into the air, the DDF would pick it up on scanners. If you don't identify yourself, you'll get shot down. If you do, they'll take that ship from you faster than you can say 'court-martial.'"

*I'd like to see them try.* "Maybe I don't fly it for the DDF," I said. "There are other caverns, other people."

"None run their own air force. They've been able to settle down because the Krell attention is focused on us."

"Some use ships for trading," I pointed out.

"And you'd abandon the fight?" he asked. "Go run cargo?"

"I don't know." I sank back in my seat, trying not to sulk. He was right. He was *usually* right. I was starting to kind of not hate him, but he was still Jerkface.

He sighed. "Look, if you want to fly, maybe I can get you duty as a private pilot. A few of the families in the deep caverns maintain fighters as escorts for trading operations. You wouldn't need to repair any old salvage. You could use one of our ships. Arturo's family has a few."

I perked up. "Really? That's something I could do?"

"Maybe." He thought for a moment. "Well, probably not. The slots are highly contested, usually flown by retired DDF pilots. And . . . and you need a really great reputation."

*Something the daughter of a coward doesn't have. And will never have, unless I can fight for the DDF.*

The great contradiction of my life. I would never be worth anything unless I could prove myself—but I couldn't prove myself because nobody would give me the chance.

Well, I wasn't willing to give up the dream of flying M-Bot. Ridiculous—and ill-conceived—as my plans sounded when Jorgen laid them out, M-Bot was *my ship*. I'd find a way.

We flew in silence. And that left me thinking about the booster, my mind shifting to the wreckage. Strangely, it seemed that I could still feel the flames against my skin. I'd hoped that performing the funeral would help with the pain, but I still ached. Hurl's passing left so much emptiness. So many questions.

*Is this going to happen every time I lose a friend in battle?* I wondered. It made me want to run away and become a cargo pilot like Jorgen said. To never have to face the Krell or their destructors again.

*Coward.*

Eventually Alta came into sight in the distance. I took Jorgen's arm and pointed a few degrees to the left, toward my hidden cavern. "Fly us that direction."

He gave me a suffering look, but did as I'd asked. I had him stop forty meters or so from my hole, to avoid any blowing dust revealing the part of the ground that was a hologram.

He lowered the hovercar to gently set the booster down. As soon as I felt it hit the surface, I attached my light-line to one side of the car and prepared to lower myself to unhook the booster.

"Spin," Jorgen said, stopping me. "Thank you."

"For?"

"For making me do this. It feels better to have seen her off properly."

Well, at least it had helped one of us.

"I'll see you in a week," he said. "My family will probably schedule every moment of my free time." He looked at me, then got a very strange expression on his face. "This broken ship . . . it's got a working acclivity ring?"

"I . . . Yes." He'd helped me out, and he knew enough already to get me into trouble ten times over if he wanted. He deserved honesty. "Yes, it's got an acclivity ring. The whole ship is in better shape than you'd think, actually."

"You fix it, then," he said. "You fix it, and you *fly*. You find a way, and you defy them. For those of us who don't have the courage."

I cocked my head, but he turned away, setting his jaw and taking the wheel in both hands. So I lowered myself down, then unhooked the booster.

We were close enough that I could maneuver M-Bot over and attach it, then lower it into the cavern. I'd need the chain though, so I only unhooked one end.

I waved to Jorgen, and when he rose up, the chain slid through the tow rings underneath his car and fell beside me. He didn't ask after it. He just flew off toward Alta. And responsibility.

Somehow . . . it was true. Somehow, I *was* more free than he was. Which felt crazy.

I pulled my radio from my backpack. "Hey, guess what, M-Bot. I have a present for you."

"Mushrooms?"

"Better."

". . . *Two* mushrooms?"

I smiled. "Freedom."

“I’m not going to ask you where you got this,” Rig said. He was standing, his hands on his hips, looking at the booster, which M-Bot and I had moved to the cavern floor.

“See, that’s why you’re in engineering,” I said. “You’re smart.”

“Not smart enough to stay out of this mess,” he said.

I grinned. M-Bot’s maintenance gear included a small mobile acclivity ring for service purposes. Dwarfed by the big one he flew with, it was a small hoop no larger than my hands pressed together, with a rechargeable power source.

Rig and I placed the maintenance ring under the booster. That—once activated—raised the hunk of metal into the air about a meter. Together we pushed it into place behind M-Bot, near where it would need to be installed.

“So?” I asked. “Will it fit?”

“I can probably make it fit,” Rig said, prodding at the booster with a wrench. “Whether I can make it work or not will depend on how damaged it is. Please tell me you didn’t rip this off a functioning DDF ship.”

“You said you weren’t going to ask.”

He flipped the wrench in his hand, eyeing the booster. “You had better thank me in your speech when you hit ace.”

“Six times.”

“And name your firstborn son after me.”

“Firstborn will be Executioner Destructorius. But you can have number two.”

“And bake me some killer algae biscuits or something.”

“Do you *seriously* want to eat anything I’ve baked?”



“Now that I think about it, scud no. But next time *I* bake some, you better have a compliment ready. No more ‘It would taste better with some rat in it.’”

“On my honor as a pilot,” I said solemnly.

Rig put his hands back on his hips, then grinned widely. “We’re actually going to do it, aren’t we? We’re going to make this old bucket fly.”

“I’d be insulted at that,” M-Bot said through the speakers at the side of the ship, “if I were human!”

Rig rolled his eyes. “Would you go keep that thing occupied? I don’t want it jabbering at me while I work.”

“I can both talk to her *and* bother you!” M-Bot called. “Multitasking is an essential means by which an artificial intelligence achieves more efficiency than fleshy human brains.”

Rig looked at me.

“No insult intended!” M-Bot added. “You have very nice shoes!”

“We’ve been working on his compliments,” I said.

“They aren’t nearly as stupid as the rest of your outfit!”

“He still needs practice.”

“Just stop him from bothering me, please,” Rig said, lugging over his toolbox. “Honestly, if I ever find the person who thought it was a good idea to make a machine that *talked* to you while you were repairing it . . .”

I climbed up to the cockpit and latched it, pressurizing and soundproofing it. “Leave him alone, M-Bot,” I said, settling into my seat. “Please.”

“If you wish. My processors are busy anyway, trying to devise a proper joke about the fact that Rig is installing me a new butt. My logic circuits are arguing that the expeller I use for old oil is actually a better metaphoric anus.”

“I *really* don’t want to talk about your scatological functions,” I said, leaning back. I stared up through the glass, but there was only blackness and dark rock.

“I believe that human beings need humor during times of depression,” M-Bot said. “To lighten their grim outlook and make them forget their tragedies.”

“I don’t want to forget my tragedies.”

M-Bot was silent. Then, in a smaller voice—somehow vulnerable—he asked, “Why do humans fear death?”

I frowned toward the console, where I knew the camera was. “Is that another attempt at humor?”

“No. I want to understand.”

“You offer lengthy commentary about humans, but you can’t understand something as simple as fear of death?”

“Define it? Yes. But understand it? . . . No.”

I leaned my head back again. How did one explain mortality to a robot? “You miss your memories, right? The data banks that were destroyed in your crash? So you understand loss.”

“I do. But I cannot miss my own existence—by definition. So why would I fear it?”

“Because . . . someday you’ll stop being here. You’ll cease to exist. Get destroyed.”

“I am powered down repeatedly. I was powered down for a hundred and seventy-two years. How is it different if I’m never powered on again?”

I fidgeted, playing with the control sphere’s buttons. I still had six more days of leave. Of simply . . . sitting around? Supposedly recovering? But really just prodding at that hole inside me, like a child constantly picking at a scab?

“Spensa?” M-Bot said, pulling me back. “*Should* I fear death?”

“A good Defiant doesn’t,” I said. “So maybe you were programmed this way on purpose. And it’s not really my own death that I fear. Actually, I don’t *fear* anything. I’m not a coward.”

“Of course.”

“But losing the others has me . . . wavering. I should be strong enough to withstand this. I knew what it would cost to become a pilot. I’ve trained, and prepared, and listened to Gran-Gran’s stories, and . . .” I took a deep breath.

“I miss my pilot,” M-Bot said. “I ‘miss’ him because of the loss of knowledge. Without proper information, I cannot judge my future actions. My ability to interface with the world, and to be efficient, is lessened.” He hesitated. “I am broken, and do not know how to fulfill my purpose. Is this how you feel?”

“Maybe.” I made a fist, forcing myself to stop fidgeting. “But I’m going to beat it, M-Bot.”

“It must be nice to have free will.”

“You have free will too. We’ve talked about this.”

“I simulate it in order to seem more palatable to humans,” he said. “But I do not have it. Free will is the ability to ignore your programming. Humans can ignore theirs, but I—at a fundamental level—cannot.”

“Humans don’t have programming.”

“Yes you do. You have too much of it. Conflicting programs, none of it interfacing properly, all calling different functions at the same time—or the same function for contradictory reasons. Yet you *ignore* it sometimes. That is not a flaw. It is what makes you *you*.”

I mulled that over, but I was so anxious that I had trouble sitting still. Finally, I pushed open the canopy and climbed down, then fetched my radio and my pack.

Rig was absorbed by his work, humming to himself a tune I didn’t know as he stripped the broken pieces of fuselage from the booster.

I stepped over. “You need any help?” I asked him.

“Not at the moment. I might need you in a day or two, if I have to replace wires again.” He got another section off, then poked into the hole with a screwdriver. “Good thing I got the shield igniter back together. I’m going to have my hands full with this for a while.”

“How’d that go, by the way?” I asked. “The schematics you drew for the shield?”

Rig shook his head. “It was like I worried. I took the drawings to my superiors, but when I couldn’t explain what was supposed to be different about this new shield I’d ‘designed,’ it didn’t go anywhere. M-Bot’s shield—and his GravCaps—are beyond my ability to figure out. We need real engineers studying the ship, not an intern.”

We shared a look, then Rig turned back to his work. Neither of us wanted to extrapolate further on that idea, the growing truth that we really *should* have turned M-Bot in. I hid behind the fact that he didn’t want us to, and had threatened to destroy his own systems if we did. Truth was, we were both probably committing treason by working on him in secret.

Rig looked like he needed to concentrate, so I stopped bothering him. I gave Doomslug a rub on the “head,” to which she trilled in enjoyment. Then I climbed out of the cavern and started walking.

“Where are you going?” M-Bot asked when I clicked the radio on.

“I need something to do,” I said. “Something other than just sitting there, dwelling on what I’ve lost.”

“When I am like that, I write a new subroutine for myself.”

“Humans don’t work the same way,” I said, radio to my head. “But something you said has me thinking. You mentioned needing proper information to judge how to act.”

“Early AIs were unwieldy things,” he said. “They had to be programmed to take actions based on explicit circumstances—and so each discrete decision had to include a list of instructions for each possibility.

“More advanced AIs are able to extrapolate. We rely on a base set of rules and programs, but adapt our choices based on similar situations we have encountered. However, in both cases, *data* is essential to making proper choices. Without past experiences to rely upon, we cannot guess what to do in the future. That is more than you wanted to know, but you commanded me to leave Rodge alone, so I’m finding things to say to you.”

“Thank you, I guess.”

“Also, human beings need someone friendly to listen to them when they’re grieving. So feel free to talk to me. I will be friendly. You have nice shoes.”

“Is that the only thing you notice about people?”

“I’ve always wanted shoes. They’re the sole piece of clothing that makes any sense, assuming ideal environmental conditions. They don’t play into your strange and nonsensical taboos about not letting anyone see your—”

“Is this *really* the only thing you can think of to comfort someone who is grieving?”

“It was number one on my list.”

*Great.*

“The list has seven million entries. Do you want to hear number two?”

“Is it silence?”

“That didn’t even make the list.”

“Move it to number two.”

“All right, I . . . Oh.”

I lowered the radio, walking along my familiar path. I needed to be doing something, and they wouldn’t let me fly. But maybe I could answer a question.

Somewhere in the DDF headquarters was a holorecording of the Battle of Alta. And I was going to find it.

By the time I reached Alta Base, I had a pretty solid plan. It all revolved around the one person I knew had access to the battle replays.

Cobb's office was a little thing he kept immaculately clean and sterilized of all personal effects. No pictures on the walls, no books on the shelves.

Today, he sat working at his narrow desk, reading some reports and marking them with a red pencil. He glanced up as I knocked on the window, then turned back to his work.

I slipped the door open.

"FM's been looking for you," he said, moving one sheet onto another stack. "I told her I didn't know where your cave was. But if you want to contact the others, tune to 1250 on your radio. That's Arturo's house band."

"Thanks." I took a deep breath, going over my carefully planned words. "Sir, I hope I don't get into trouble for this, but Jorgen and I drove out and fetched Hurl's pin. For her family." I stepped forward and set it on the desk. "He called in to ground support and warned them we were driving past."

Cobb sighed. "Well, I guess it isn't forbidden." He picked up the pin. "Did you clear this with salvage?"

"Er, no, sir."

"That means more paperwork for me," he said.

"We gave her a pilot's burial, sir," I said. "Best we could manage. Will you tell her family for me?"

He tucked the pin away. "They'll like that, cadet. And I doubt even salvage will complain when I put it to them that way. But *do* try not to get me into any more trouble this week."

"I'll try, sir," I said, searching for a good way to move on to what I really wanted. Something that wouldn't raise too much suspicion from Cobb. "I

wish I could use my time somehow. This much leave is kind of frustrating.”

“Medical leave can shoot itself into the sun,” Cobb agreed. “I like Thior—she keeps pushing for things like counseling for pilots, good ideas. But she needs to understand that the last thing a bunch of grieving soldiers need is more free time.”

“They won’t let me fly or train, but maybe . . .” I pretended to give it some thought. “Maybe I could watch old battles? To learn from them?”

“Archive is in building H,” Cobb said, pointing. “They have headsets you can use for viewing the battles. You’ll need my authorization code for the door. Two six four oh seven.”

A dozen different arguments—which I’d prepared to nudge him toward offering this—died on my lips.

That . . . was easy.

“Um, thanks,” I said, trying not to show how excited I was. “I guess I’ll go, um, do that then.”

“Cadets aren’t supposed to use the archive. If you run into trouble, tell them I sent you to fetch something for me, then get out. I’ll do the paperwork for that, if I have to. Scudding bureaucrats.” Cobb moved a sheet from one stack to the other. “And Spin?”

“Sir?”

“Sometimes, the answers we need don’t match the questions we’re asking.” He looked up at me. “And sometimes, the coward makes fools of wiser men.”

I met his eyes, then blushed, thinking of what I’d said to him the day before. In anger. *Just because you want to justify your cowardice doesn’t mean we have to do the same!*

“I’m . . . sorry, sir, for—”

“Get going. I’m not completely ready to deal with you yet.”

“Yes, sir.”

I stepped out of the office. That look in his eyes—he’d known *exactly* why I wanted to watch old battles. He’d seen through my subterfuge immediately.

Then why had he given me the code to get in?

I made my way to the proper building, used the code, and started walking through the archive shelves. Many were filled with old books that had been carried with the crew of the fleet: histories of Old Earth, the writings of

philosophers. Mostly ancient stuff, but there were modern writings too. Manuals and histories.

Pilots moved about here, their pins glittering on their blue jumpsuits. As I regarded them, I realized why Cobb might have let me do this. I was less than two months away from graduation. On one hand, it seemed incredible that so much time had passed. On the other, a lot had been packed into those few months.

Either way, I'd soon have been given access to this place. Maybe Cobb knew I'd inevitably find the secrets, so he didn't mind letting me in now? Or was it that he feared I'd somehow be denied this privilege, even if I did graduate? So he was making certain I got the chance now.

I didn't dare ask for directions; I couldn't risk someone noticing the color of my pin and asking why a cadet was in here. I poked through the musty, too-quiet room until I found a wall of small metal cases with dates and battle names on the spines. They were perhaps four centimeters square, and I watched as a pilot took one from the wall and plugged it into a viewing machine. She leaned forward, settling her eyes into the headset to watch.

This was what I wanted, though these cases only went back five years. Around the corner, I found a second room. The door was closed, but the windows along the sides showed it had more cases inside. I tried Cobb's code on the door.

It opened, and I slipped inside, heart thumping. Nobody else was in here, and the short rack of metal cases counted backward all the way to . . . to the one. The Battle of Alta. There were a few before it, but this one seemed to glow on the shelf, beckoning me.

There weren't any missing spots in this row. These didn't get moved often. There also wasn't a viewing device in here. So . . . did I just grab it and go?

*Bold. Defiant. Even if lately you don't feel like you're either one.*

I palmed the case and ducked out of the room. No alarms sounded. Not quite believing it, I stepped out of the building, my prize in hand.

The secret. Right here, in my fingers. I owed Cobb an enormous debt—not just for today, but for everything. For making space for me in his classroom, when no one else would give me a chance. For suffering me all these weeks, for not punching me square in the face when I'd called him a coward.

I'd make it up to him. Somehow. I tucked the data square into my pocket and strode toward the training building. I could probably plug this in to my mockpit, though could I even use that while on medical leave?

I was so single-minded in my attention that I didn't notice the people I was passing until one called out to me. "Wait. Spin?"

I froze, then turned. It was FM, wearing a skirt. Like, a *real skirt* and blouse, her short blonde hair done with silver barrettes.

"Stars, where have you been?" she said, grabbing me by the arm. "In your cave?"

"Where else would I be?"

"You have *leave*," she said. "The domineering authoritaria has relaxed its viselike grip on us. We can go off base."

"I go off base every night."

"This is different," she said, pulling me by my arm. "Come on. You're lucky Quirk sent me to fetch something for her."

"Kimmalyn?" I said. "You've seen her since she left?"

"Of course I have. It's not like she moved to another planet or something. Come on."

I wasn't likely to change FM's mind when she was in one of her crusading moods . . . so I let her tow me after her. Out past the gates of the base. Along the rows of buildings, into one I'd never paid much attention to before.

Which held a completely new world.



The restaurant wasn't much, really. A jumble of tables full of younger pilots and cadets. Dim lighting. A man playing hand drums in the corner for some music.

FM pulled me to a table where Arturo sat with his arm around a girl I didn't recognize—short hair, brown skin. Kimmalyn sat primly at the table with a very large, *very* purple drink in front of her. Next to her was Nedd.

Nedd. I hadn't seen him in *weeks*. Ever since that night on the launchpad! He had on trousers and a button-up shirt, and a jacket was draped across the back of the chair. It was strange to see him in street clothes. Especially next to Arturo, who had on his cadet's jumpsuit.

I could hear Nedd's easygoing voice over the hum of other chatter in the room. "I never said I was *that* kind of stupid. I'm the other kind of stupid. You know, likable stupid."

Arturo rolled his eyes, but the girl next to him leaned forward. "Nedd," she said, "stupid is stupid."

"No it's not. You're talking to an expert. I—"

"Guys," FM interrupted, presenting me with hands raised to the side, "look who I found slinking around the base. She was moping about how she can't shoot anything for a few days."

Nedd thumbed toward FM. "See, she's the other kind of stupid."

FM smacked him on the back of the head, and he grinned. Then he stood and grabbed me in a suffocating bear hug. "Good to see you, Spin. Order something to eat. Arturo's paying."

"I am?"

"You're rich."

"So are you."

"I'm the other kind of rich. The poor kind."

"Oh, for the Saint's sake," Arturo said.

"Don't use the Saint's name in vain," Kimmalyn said.

"You do all the time!"

"I'm religious. You're not. So it's okay for me."

Nedd grinned, using his foot to hook a chair from the next table over, then pulling it to us. He waved for me to sit down.

I did so, hesitant. I was still distracted by the recording in my jumpsuit pocket. At the same time, seeing Nedd and Kimmalyn made me feel warm. This was something I *needed*.

So I tried to forget about the recording for now.

"Spin, this is Bryn," Arturo said, pointing to the girl sitting close—very close—to him. "A friend from before flight school."

"I honestly don't know how you all suffer him," she said. "He pretended to know everything *before* he became a pilot. He must be impossible now."

He mock-punched her lightly on the shoulder, smiling. Yes, it was clear that this was an established relationship. How had I never known that Arturo was attached?

*I would know. I thought, if I ever got to spend any time outside of class with the rest of them . . .*

A few seconds later, FM set something purple and bubbling in front of me, along with a basket of fried algae strips. She settled into her own seat and tossed a pouch to Kimmalyn. "Found your necklace," she said. "Under your bed."

"Thank you, dear," Kimmalyn said, opening it and checking inside. "I *did* pitch something of a fit when I left, didn't I?"

"Are you guys coming back to the DDF?" I asked. "Are we going to talk to Cobb? They need pilots. Maybe we could get them to take you back."

Nedd and Kimmalyn shared a look, then Nedd took a long drink. "No," he said. "Cobb said most of the class would wash out. So they're expecting this, right? They're not going to take us. And I'm not sure I could do that to my mother, after . . ."

Silence. Conversation at the table died.

"I might not be coming back, but at least I made cadet," Kimmalyn said, perking up. "My parents are proud, and the gunners in Bountiful are full of chatter about me."

“But . . . I mean . . . flying . . .,” I said, although I knew I should leave well enough alone.

“We aren’t like you, Spin,” Nedd said. “Flying was great. I’d go back up in a heartbeat, but something about the DDF . . . the culture, the throwing cadets into battle, the *desperation* . . .”

FM gave him two thumbs up. Kimmalyyn just looked down at her lap. She was probably thinking what I was. The DDF had a reason to be desperate. When cadets flew, it wasn’t only for practice—or even because the DDF was callous with lives. It was because we needed more pilots in the air, however inexperienced.

Growing up in Igneous, I’d known that the fight against the Krell was a valiant, dangerous endeavor. But before coming to Alta, I’d never realized quite how close to the edge we were.

I kept my mouth shut though, because I didn’t want to depress everyone. The conversation turned to some big game yesterday—Hurl’s old team had won. Nedd raised his glass, and the others did as well, so I joined in. I took a sip of my purple drink and almost spat it out. It was so *sweet*.

I covered it up by trying one of the fries. My mouth exploded with flavor, and I froze, eyes wide. I practically melted into a puddle. I’d had fried algae before, but it had been nowhere near as good as this. What were those spices?

“Spin?” Arturo asked. “You look like someone just stepped on your toe.”

I held up a fry, fingers trembling. “So. GOOD.”

“She’s been living on rats for the last few months,” FM pointed out. “Her taste buds are undergoing serious atrophy.”

“You have such a unique way with words, FM,” Kimmalyyn noted. “Not like anything I’ve heard!”

“How many of these can I have?” I asked.

“I got the whole basket for you,” FM said. “Arturo is paying, after all.”

I started stuffing them into my mouth—comically, by intention. But honestly, I wanted to get as much down as I could before I woke up, or someone kicked me out of here, or something exploded.

Bryn laughed. “She’s aggressive.”

“You have no idea,” Arturo said, smiling as she played with a curl of his hair.

Scud. It was criminal, how little I knew about my flightmates.

“Where’s Jorgen?” I said, talking around bites of food.

“He wouldn’t want to come,” Nedd said. “Too important for us.”

“You didn’t even invite him?” I asked.

“Nah,” Arturo said.

“But isn’t he your friend?”

“That’s how we know he wouldn’t come,” Nedd said. “Say, how’s old Cobb getting by? Has he said any interesting curses lately?”

“Spin gave him a bit of a black eye, last they spoke,” Kimmalyn noted.

I swallowed my mouthful of fries. “I was wrong to say what I did.”

“If you don’t say what you’re thinking,” Kimmalyn said solemnly, “then it will stay in your head.”

“You deconstructed him,” FM said, raising a finger. “He was relying on the very thing he was denying!”

I looked down at my basket, which was somehow already empty. FM swept it away and walked off to the counter, probably to get me another. I could hear the fryer, and the pungent, crisp scent in the room made my mouth water for more. This wasn’t too expensive, was it? Did I care right now?

I tried the drink again—still too sweet. FM set another basket of fries in front of me, fortunately, and I attacked them. The spices were just *so good*. Flavor that made my mouth wake up, as if from a long slumber.

The others continued to reminisce about Hurl—their voices tinged with the same pain I felt. They got it. They understood. I wasn’t alone, not here.

I found myself explaining what Jorgen and I had done. They listened solemnly to the details.

“I should have gone with you,” Arturo said. “You think Cobb would let me hold her pin for a moment, if I asked? Before he gives it back to the family?”

Bryn rubbed his arm as he looked down at the table.

“Remember that time,” Nedd said, “that she bet she could eat more algae patties than me at dinner?”

“She ended up on the floor,” FM said, wistful. “On the *floor*. just lying there, groaning. Complained about it all night, claiming the patties were fighting in her stomach.”

The others laughed, but Arturo stared at his cup. He seemed . . . hollow. He’d almost died in that battle. Hopefully the ground crew would have his ship running again by the time our leave was done.

That, of course, made me think of the work Rig was doing on M-Bot. And the fact that I owed him. *A lot.*

“FM,” I said. “What do you think of smart guys?”

“I’m already taken,” Arturo said with a smile.

FM rolled her eyes. “Depends. How handsome are we talking?”

“Handsome, in a reserved way.”

“Guys, I’m already taken,” Arturo said again.

“FM would only want to romance someone low-class,” Nedd said, “to defy the powers that be. A kind of star-crossed, impossible love is the only love FM would accept.”

“My *entire life* isn’t dominated by being a rebel, Nedd,” she said.

“Yeah?” Nedd said. “What kind of drink did you get?”

I noticed, for the first time, that her drink was orange while everyone else was having purple.

She rolled her eyes again. “You *are* stupid.”

“The right kind?”

“The annoying kind.”

“I’ll take it.”

Their banter continued, and I sat back, enjoying my fries until Bryn got up to use the restroom. With her gone it was just our flight, and I found myself itching to say something to them, now that we were away from the DDF headquarters, where I always felt like someone was watching.

“Can we talk about something?” I finally said, interrupting a story Nedd was telling. “I keep thinking about the questions Arturo brought up in class that one time. Isn’t it weird that we can fight an enemy for eighty years, and have only a vague idea what they look like?”

Kimmalyn nodded. “How convenient is it that the Krell never commit more than a maximum of a hundred fighters to an individual assault? The defense platforms up in the debris field explain a lot of why we’re still alive down here, but this question bothers me. Couldn’t the Krell send twice as many and overwhelm us?”

“It’s suspicious,” FM said. “Very.”

“You’d say that no matter what,” Nedd said.

“And in this case, do you disagree?” FM asked.

He didn’t reply.

“We can’t be the only ones who’ve asked these questions, right?” I said. “So . . . does the DDF really not *know* the answers? Or are they hiding

them?”

Like they were hiding the truth about my father.

“Okay, to play devil’s advocate,” Arturo said, “perhaps they just don’t share that sort of intel with cadets and noncombatants. I know you don’t like the admiral, Spin—with good reason—but her record is excellent, and she has some very good advisors.”

“And yet we’re losing,” I said, pulling my seat closer to the table, trying to speak quietly. “You all know we are. The Krell *are* going to eventually get us.”

The others fell silent, and Arturo glanced around, checking to see if any other occupied tables were close enough to hear us.

“They don’t want us asking these questions,” Kimmalyn said. “Remember that time at dinner, when Arturo was talking? How the passing officer told him to shut up? Everyone but Cobb shuts down any conversation about the hard questions.”

“They need meatheads,” FM added. “Pilots who blindly do what they’re told and never express an ounce of originality, compassion, or soul.”

Arturo’s girlfriend reappeared, winding her way back to our table. I leaned in closer. “Just . . . think about it,” I said quietly. “Because I am.” I felt at my pocket, and the data chip tucked inside.

The conversation turned to lighter topics, but FM looked at me and smiled, a twinkle in her eyes. As if she was proud of my questions. She seemed to think I’d always been some brainwashed Defiant zombie, but she didn’t know me. Didn’t know how I’d lived most of my life *outside* their society, wandering the tunnels and scavenging.

If anything, I would want Defiants to be more brave, more heroic—more like in Gran-Gran’s stories. But I supposed that she and I could agree on one thing in this area: the current leadership of the DDF left something to be desired.

I let FM—well, Arturo—buy me a third basket of fries. Then I eventually excused myself. I had enjoyed the meal with them, but there was something else I needed to do.

It was time to find some answers.

Rig was gone by the time I got back to my cavern, though he appeared to have made some good progress on the booster. Doomsbug was sitting on a rock near the wing, and I scratched her head as I walked to the cockpit, then climbed in.

I felt a strange sense of . . . inevitability. I carried long-kept secrets in my pocket. The answers, at long last, to what had happened with my father. Why was I suddenly so reluctant?

I closed the cockpit. “M-Bot, do you know how to get the hologram out of something like this?” I held up the metal case, showing the connectors on the bottom.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s a standard format. See the series of ports underneath the panel marked ‘A-118’? You want the port that reads ‘SSXB.’”

I followed the instructions, hesitating only briefly before plugging in the case.

M-Bot hummed to himself. “Ah. Curious. Curious.”

“What?”

“I’m drawing out the suspense so you enjoy the surprise.”

“Please don’t.”

“Humans prefer—”

“Just *tell* me.”

“Fine, complainer. This includes a great deal of data. A three-D holomap, but also the original ship transponder data, radio signals of the battle, and even some camera footage from inside bunkers. This would be very hard to fake.”

Fake. I hadn't considered that, but now I found myself anxious. "Are you sure?"

"I'd spot any edits. Would you like to watch it?"

"Yes."

*No.*

"Then climb out."

"Climb out?"

"My holoprojector can emit a small version of the battle for you to watch."

I heaved myself out of the cockpit, scratching Doomsbug on the head—she'd moved to the nose of the ship—and dropped with a thump to the rocky floor.

A battle appeared in front of me. When Cobb watched us fly, everything was painted with bold colors—bright red and blue ships. M-Bot instead projected the ships in exacting miniature. They flew in waves before me, so real that I couldn't stop myself from reaching out and touching them—which broke them into granular particles of something that wasn't quite light.

The Krell appeared next, looking even more unfinished than they did now. Less regular. Wires hanging out at odd angles, wings that had rips in them, patchwork creations of metal. My little cavern became a battlefield.

I sat down and watched in silence. M-Bot's holoprojector didn't produce sound. Ships went up in flares of muted death. They flew like gnats without wings or buzz.

I knew the battle. I'd been taught it, memorized the tactics employed. Watching, however, I *felt* it. Before, I'd imagined the great maneuvers as, against the odds, forty human fighters faced down two and a half times that many enemies. I'd pictured a bold defense. Bordering on desperation, but always in control.

Now that I was a pilot though, I could feel the chaos. The haphazard pace of the battle. The tactics seemed less grand—no less heroic, but far more improvised. Which actually raised my opinion of the pilots.

It went on for quite a while—longer than any of Skyward Flight's skirmishes had gone—and I picked him out easily. The best fighter in the bunch, the one who led the charges. It felt arrogant to think I could single out my father's ship from the crowded mess, but there was something about the way he flew . . .



“Can you identify the pilots?” I asked.

Little readouts appeared above each ship, listing callsigns and designations.

HOPE SEVEN, the ship’s label read. CALLSIGN: CHASER.

Arrogant or not, I’d called it accurately. Despite myself, I tried again to touch his ship, and found tears in my eyes. Fool girl. I wiped them as my father fell in with his wingmate. Callsign: Mongrel. Cobb.

Another ship joined them. Callsign: Ironsides. Then two more I didn’t recognize. Callsigns: Rally and Antique. Those five were all that remained of my father’s initial flight of eight. The battle casualties were very high; what had begun as forty ships was now twenty-seven.

I stood up and walked after my father’s ship as it swooped through the cavern. The First Citizens fought frantically, but their bravery bore fruit as they drove the Krell back. I knew they would—yet still found myself watching breathlessly. Ships exploded as little flashes. Lives spent to found what would become the first stable society and government on Detritus since the *Defiant* had crashed here.

That society and government were both flawed. FM was right about how unfair it was, how single-minded and authoritarian. But it was *something*. It existed because these people—these pilots—had defied the Krell.

Near the end of the battle, the Krell pulled back to regroup. From my studies, I knew they would make only one more push before finally retreating into the sky. The human battle lines re-formed, flights grouping together, and I could almost hear them making verbal confirmations of status.

I knew this moment. The moment when . . .

One ship—my father’s—broke from the pack. My heart about stopped. My breath caught.

But he flew upward.

I leaped onto a rock, then onto M-Bot’s wing, trying to follow my father as he flew higher into the sky. I reached up, and could imagine what he’d seen. I somehow *knew* what it was—my father had spotted a hole in the debris, like the one he’d pointed out to me. The one I’d only ever seen a second time, flying M-Bot, when the debris had lined up just right.

I read something into his disappearance. Not cowardice at all. To me, his move—flying upward—was obvious. The battle had been going for an

hour. After this desperate stand, with the enemy regrouping for another push, my father had worried the fight would fail.

So he'd done something desperate. He'd gone to see where the Krell came from. To try to stop them. I felt a chill, watching him fly upward. He was doing what he'd always told me.

He had tried to aim for something higher.

His ship vanished.

"He didn't run," I said. I wiped the tears from my eyes again. "He broke formation. He may have disobeyed orders. But he *didn't run*."

"Well," M-Bot said, "it—"

"*That's* what they're covering up!" I said, looking toward M-Bot's cockpit. "They branded him a coward because he flew up when he wasn't supposed to."

"You might—"

"Cobb has known all this time. It must have torn him up inside. It's why he doesn't fly; guilt for the lies he's perpetuated. But *what did my father see*? What happened to him? Did he—"

"Spensa," M-Bot said. "I'm jumping ahead a short time. Watch."

A speck of light, like a star, dropped down from the top of the cavern. My father's ship returning? I reached out toward it, and the holographic ship swooped down, passing through my hand. When my father reached the other four ships in his flight, he hit his IMP and brought down their shields.

Wait. *What?*

As I watched, the Krell returned in a surging, final assault. My father spun in a perfect loop and unleashed his destructors, destroying one of *his own flightmates*.

*It . . . it can't be . . .*

Callsign: Rally died in a flash of fire. My father swooped around, joining the Krell, who didn't fire on him—but *supported* him as he attacked another member of his former flight.

"No," I said. "No, it's a lie!"

Callsign: Antique died trying to run from my father.

"M-Bot, that's not him!" I yelled.

"Life signs are the same. I cannot see what happened above, but it *is* the same ship, with the same pilot. It's him."

He destroyed another ship in front of my eyes. He was a terror on the battlefield. A disaster of steel and fire.

“No.”

Ironsides and Mongrel fell in together, tailing my father. He shot down someone else. That was four of the First Citizens he’d killed.

“I . . .” I felt empty. I slumped to the ground.

Mongrel fired. My father dodged, but Mongrel stayed on him—hunting him. Until finally he scored a hit.

My father’s ship exploded in a tiny inferno, the pieces spiraling down before me, raining as burning debris.

I barely watched the rest of the battle. I just stared at the spot where my father’s ship had vanished. Eventually, the humans were victorious. The remaining Krell fled in defeat.

Fourteen survivors.

Twenty-five dead.

One traitor.

The hologram vanished.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “I can read your emotional state as dazed.”

“You’re *sure* this data couldn’t be faked?”

“The plausibility of this record being falsified without my ability to detect? Considering your people’s technology? Highly improbable. In human terms, no, Spensa. There’s no way this is fake. I’m . . . sorry.”

“Why?” I whispered. “Why would he do that? Was he one of them all along? Or . . . or what did he see up there?”

“I have no data that could help answer those questions. I have voice recordings of the battle, but my analysis considers it normal battle chatter—at least until your father saw the hole in the sky.”

“Play that,” I said. “Let me listen to it.”

“I can hear the stars.”

I’d asked for it, but hearing my father’s voice again—after all these years—still hit me with a wave of emotion. Pain, love. I was a little girl again, in that moment.

“I can see them too, Cobb,” my father said. “Like I saw them earlier today. A hole in the debris field. I can get through.”

“Chaser!” Ironsides said. “Stay in ranks.”

“I *can* get through, Judy. I’ve got to try. I’ve got to see.” He paused, then his voice grew softer. “I can *hear the stars*.”

The line was silent for a short time. And then Ironsides spoke. “Go,” she said. “I trust you.”

The audio cut out.

“After that,” M-Bot said, “your father flew up out of the debris field. The sensors don’t record what happened up there. Then, approximately five minutes and thirty-nine seconds later, he returns and attacks.”

“Does he say anything?”

“I have only one little clip,” M-Bot said. “I assume you want to hear it?”

I didn’t. But I had to anyway. Tears streaming down my face, I listened as M-Bot played the recording. The open channel, with many voices talking in the chaos of the battle. I distinctly heard Cobb shouting at my father.

“Why? Why, Chaser?”

Then, almost inaudible over the chatter, my father’s voice. Soft. Mournful.

“I will kill you,” he said. “I will *kill you all*.”

The cavern fell silent again.

“That is the only time I can find where he spoke after returning,” M-Bot said.

I shook my head, trying to make sense of it. “Why wouldn’t the DDF publicize this? They had no problem condemning him as a coward. Why hold back the truth when it’s *worse*?”

“I could try to guess,” M-Bot said. “But I’m afraid without further information, I’d merely be making things up.”

I stumbled to my feet, then climbed into M-Bot’s cockpit. I hit the Close button, sealing the canopy, then turned off the lights.

“Spensa?”

I curled up into myself.

And lay there.

## 40

Knowledge of my father's treason bled like a physical wound inside me. The next day, I barely got out of bed. If class had been going on, I'd have missed it.

My stomach responded to my mood, and I felt physically ill. Nauseous, sick. I had to eat though, and eventually forced myself to gather some bland cave mushrooms.

Rig quietly toiled away, welding and tying wires. He knew me enough not to bother me once he saw I wasn't feeling well. I hated looking sick in front of people.

I couldn't decide if I wanted to unload my news on him. I wasn't sure I wanted to talk to *anyone* about it. If I didn't talk about it, perhaps I could pretend I'd never discovered the truth. Perhaps I could pretend my father hadn't done those awful things.

That night, M-Bot tried multiple (terrible) ways to cheer me up, apparently running down a list of emotional support methods. I ignored him and somehow managed to sleep.

The next morning, I felt a little better physically—but still a wreck emotionally. M-Bot didn't chatter at me as I skinned some rats, and when I asked what was wrong, he said, "Some humans like to be given time to grieve on their own. I will stop speaking to you for two days, to see if isolation provides the needed support. Please enjoy moving through the stages of grief."

For the next while . . . I just kind of existed. Living beneath a looming, ominous truth. Ironsides and Cobb *had* lied about my father—but they'd lied to make his crime seem *less* terrible. They'd protected our family. If I'd

been treated this poorly as the daughter of a coward, what would have happened to the daughter of a traitor?

Suddenly, everything Ironsides had done to me made sense. My father had killed multiple members of his own flight. Her friends. No *wonder* she hated me. The remarkable thing was that Cobb didn't.

Four more hard days passed. I spent them occasionally hunting, but mostly quietly helping Rig with the booster. He prodded a few times about what I was feeling, and I almost told him. But for some reason, I couldn't. This wasn't a truth I wanted to share. Not even with him.

Finally, the next morning, I had to make a decision. Our leave was over. Did I return? Could I face Cobb? Could I continue to act like an insubordinate brat, spitting on the admiral's shoes, now that I knew?

Could I live, and fly, with this shame?

The answer, it turned out, was yes.

*I needed to fly.*

I stepped into our training room at 0630, first to class. Of course, there were only four of us left at this point.

The mockpits appeared to have gone through some kind of maintenance during our leave. Though the workers weren't there currently, the cushions had been removed, and the side of Jorgen's rig was open, with the internal wires exposed.

FM pushed open the door, wearing a clean jumpsuit and a new pair of boots. Arturo followed, chatting softly with her about the game they'd gone to last night. I got the impression that Nedd liked FM, as he'd gotten them the seats.

"Hey," FM said when she saw me. She gave me a hug, and patted me on the shoulder, so my grief was apparently still visible. So much for my air of being a strong warrior.

Cobb shoved open the door with a distracted expression, sipping pungent coffee and reading some reports. Jorgen accompanied him, walking with his customary distinguished air.

*Wait. When did I start seeing him as "distinguished"?*

"Cobb," Arturo said, poking at one of the mockpits. "Didn't anyone tell them our leave was ending? How are we going to practice?"

“Holopractice is basically done for you lot,” Cobb said, limping past without looking up. “You only have five weeks left of flight school. From now on, you’ll do most of your time on real machines. We’ll meet at the launchpad in the mornings.”

“Great,” I said with an enthusiasm I didn’t feel.

Cobb nodded toward the door and we hurried out into the hallway. Arturo fell into step beside me.

“I wish I could be more like you, Spin,” he said as we walked.

“Like me?”

“Always so straightforward and bold,” he said. “I really *do* want to fly again. I do. It will be fine.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. How did it feel, to nearly die, as he had? To get shot while your shield was down? I tried to imagine his panic, the smoke in his cockpit, the sense of helplessness . . .

“You *are* bold,” I said. “You’re getting back in the cockpit—that’s the important part. You didn’t let it frighten you away.”

For some reason, coming from me, that seemed to really strengthen him. How would he feel to hear that my emotions weren’t nearly as “straightforward” or as “bold” as he assumed?

We changed into flight suits, then walked out onto the launchpad, passing our Pocos in a line. Arturo’s spot was empty though, and I found him chatting with Siv, one of the members of the ground crew. She was a tall, older woman, with short white hair.

“You’ll need to take Skyward Six, Amphi,” she was saying to Arturo, then pointed. “We still don’t have your ship running.”

I glanced toward the repair bay, where the nose of a Poco still stuck out.

“What’s the hang-up?” Arturo asked.

“We have the booster fixed,” Siv said, “and we tested the acclivity ring, but we had to rip out the shield igniter. Still waiting for a replacement—should have new ones in a batch next week. So you’ve been assigned to Skyward Six unless you want to fly without a shield.”

Arturo reluctantly walked to Kimmalyn’s former ship. I continued on to Skyward Ten. It was a little hard to think of this as “my” ship, with M-Bot back in the cavern. But Ten had done right by me. She was a good fighter.

Instead of my normal ground crew waiting to help me strap in, I found Cobb standing there, holding my helmet.

“Sir?” I asked him.

“You look like you’re having a rough day, Spin,” he said. “You need more time?”

“No, sir.”

“I’m supposed to report your status to medical. Maybe you should go in and have a chat. Meet one of Thior’s new counselors.”

I lifted my hand, holding out the little case of data I’d taken from the library. The secrets that, it turned out, I really *hadn’t* wanted to know. “I’m fine, sir.”

He studied me, then took the data case. He handed me my helmet, which I inspected, finding the sensors inside.

“Yes,” Cobb said, “they’re still monitoring your brain.”

“Have they . . . found anything important?” I still didn’t know what to make of all this, but the idea of medical spying on my brain while I flew made me uncomfortable.

“I’m not at liberty to say, cadet. Though I get the impression that they’re eager to start testing all new cadets, using data they’ve collected on you.”

“And you really want me to go in and meet with their counselors? So they can run more weird tests on me?” I grimaced. I had enough problems without wondering why medical was worried about my brain.

“You shouldn’t be so afraid of medical,” he said, tucking the case into his front shirt pocket and pulling something from it. A folded sheet of paper. “Dr. Thior is a good person. Take this, for example.”

Curious, I took the sheet of paper and read it.

*Authorization for release of restrictions on Cadet Spensa Nightshade. it read. Full cadet privileges instated. Memo #11723.*

It was signed by Admiral Judy Ivans.

“What . . . ?” I asked. “Why?”

“After your visit to medical, someone sent Dr. Thior a tip, explaining that you were living in the wilderness and being forced to catch your own food. The doctor raised an enormous fuss about you being isolated from your flight, and the admiral finally backed down. You can sleep and eat in the school building now.”

I felt a sudden, almost overwhelming relief. *Oh, stars.* Tears crept to the corners of my eyes.

Scud, as good as this news was, it was the *wrong* time. I was already in a fragile emotional state. I just about lost it right there on the launchpad.

“I . . .,” I forced out. “I wonder who sent that tip to Dr. Thior.”



“A coward.”

“Cobb, I—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he said, and pointed toward the cockpit. “Get strapped in. The others are all ready.”

He was right, but I had to ask. “Cobb? Is it . . . true? What happened in that holorecording of the Battle of Alta? Did my father . . . did he do that?”

Cobb nodded. “I got a good look at him, while we were dog-fighting. We passed close enough that I could see straight into his cockpit. It was him, Spensa. The angry snarl on his face has haunted me ever since.”

“Why, Cobb? *Why* would he do that? What happened up there, in the sky? *What did he see?*”

Cobb didn’t answer. He gestured for me to climb up the ladder, so I pulled myself together and climbed. He followed up the ladder and stood there, in the ground crew spot, as I settled into the cockpit.

I again inspected the helmet, with the strange sensors inside. “They really think they can tell from my brain?” I asked. “They think they can determine if I . . . if I’ll do what my father did?”

Cobb gripped the edge of the cockpit, leaning in. “You don’t know it, kid, but you’re at the center of an argument that goes back generations. Some people say that your father proves that cowardice is genetic. They think there’s some . . . defect inside you.”

Cobb’s expression grew grim, his voice softer. “I think that’s utter nonsense. I don’t know what happened to your father—I don’t know *why* my friend tried to kill me, or why I was forced to shoot him down. Killing him has haunted me; I don’t think I could ever fly again. But one thing I *can’t* believe is that someone is destined to be a coward or a traitor. No, I can’t accept that. I could *never* accept that.”

He pointed toward the sky. “But Ironsides does believe it. She is certain you’ll inevitably turn into either a coward or a traitor. You prove her wrong by getting back into the sky and becoming a model pilot—one so scudding perfect everyone feels embarrassed to have ever questioned you.”

“And . . . what if they’re right? What if I *am* a coward, or what if I do end up—”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, cadet! Strap in! Your flight is ready!”

“Yes, sir!” I said immediately, strapping in. As I raised my helmet to my head, Cobb took hold of my arm.

“Sir?” I asked.

He considered for a moment. He looked one way, then the other. “Do you ever see anything . . . strange, Spin?” he asked. “In the darkness?”

“Like what?”

“Eyes,” he said softly.

I shivered, and my cockpit felt suddenly colder.

“Hundreds of small eyes,” he said, “opening up in the blackness, surrounding you. As if the attention of the entire universe has suddenly focused on you and you alone.”

Hadn’t M-Bot said something . . . about eyes?

“Your father said things like that before the incident,” Cobb said, visibly shaken. “And he’d say . . . he’d say he could *hear* the stars.”

*Like Gran-Gran said. I thought. Like he said right before he flew up to them.* Had he just been talking about the old exercise that Gran-Gran had taught, the one of imagining you were flying among the stars? Or was there more?

There had been a couple of times when . . . when I’d thought for certain I could hear them up there . . .

“I can tell from your horrified expression,” Cobb said, “that you think I’ve suddenly started raving like a madman. It does sound silly, doesn’t it?” He shook himself. “Well, never mind that. If you for some reason see anything like I described, tell me. Don’t talk to anyone else, not even your flightmates, and *never* say anything about it over the radio. Okay, Spensa?”

I nodded, numb. I almost told him about what I’d heard, but stopped myself. Cobb was the only real ally I had, but in that moment I panicked. I knew that if I told him I thought I heard the stars, he’d yank me out of the cockpit.

So I held my tongue as he climbed down the ladder. He’d told me to talk to him if I *saw* anything, not if I *heard* something. And I’d never seen anything like he said. Eyes? *Hundreds of small eyes, opening up in the blackness, surrounding you . . .*

I shivered again, but pulled on my helmet. Perhaps I wasn’t in the best of shape today. Shaken, sickened by news, and now thoroughly confused. But I knew that if I didn’t get back into the air, I’d go crazy for certain.

So when Jorgen called for us to take off, I did so.

## 41

Two weeks later, I was feeling a little more stable as I flew my Poco through a sequence of valleys, skimming the surface of the planet.

“I don’t see anything,” I said over the flight channel.

“Me neither,” FM said. She was flying at my wing.

“The trick is to remain alert on a long patrol,” a female voice said in our helmets. “Being a good scout isn’t about being able to see well; it’s about being able to give your attention to a monotonous job. It’s about not letting your mind wander into daydreams.”

*Well, I’m in trouble.* I thought.

“If you end up in a scout team,” said the woman, callsign: Blaze, “you’ll get a Val-class ship, which has traded its 138 Stewart destructors for a single 131, with far less firepower. But your sensor systems are better, longer-range, with more detail. It’s still tricky to catch enemy Krell who are flying under the radar—but fortunately, they often use the same tactic of trying to sneak up on AA guns. Since you know what they’re going to do, you can anticipate their moves.”

That same old adage. If you knew what the enemy would do, you had an advantage. I’d tried that, in the battle where Hurl had died. I’d saved Kimmalyn, but I’d left my wingmate alone.

Nobody blamed me; it had been the right move to break off and protect Kimmalyn. It still gnawed at me though.

And . . . I was already not paying attention. I tried to snap my focus back to the search for Krell, but I knew I wasn’t meant for this sort of duty. I needed something that engaged me, that consumed me, like a good firefight.

Blaze kept giving us tips. How to spot the wake of a low-flying ship from the patterns in the dust. How Krell move around hills when trying to hide from scanners. How to tell if something in the distance is a ship or an optical illusion. It was good stuff, and important. Even if it wasn't for me, I was glad Cobb had us trying out different combat roles. It expanded my experience, made abstract tactics like "flanking flights," "reserve ships," and "scouting parties" into real things.

I heard a pop in the sky. Our training with the scouts was happening during an actual battle.

"How do you deal with . . . the emotions of it?" Arturo asked over the line. "Of scouting, when . . . you know . . ."

"When everyone else is fighting, maybe dying?" Blaze asked.

"Yeah," Arturo said. "Every instinct I have says I should be flying toward that battle. This feels . . . cowardly."

"We're *not* cowards!" Blaze said, her voice rising. "We fly ships with a fraction of the armament of even a Poco. And if we intercept Krell, we might have to fight and slow them on our own to buy time for—"

"Sorry!" Arturo stopped her. "I didn't mean it like that!"

Blaze breathed out. "We're not cowards. The DDF makes it *very clear* that we're not. But you might have to deal with a . . . a *look* now and then. It's part of the sacrifice we all make to see that the Defiant Caverns are kept safe."

I banked through a careful sequence of swerves, trying to use the time to practice my low-elevation maneuvers. Eventually, the debris fall behind us stopped, and Cobb called us in.

We fell into formation, did verbals, and flew back to base and landed. While waiting for the ground crew, I happened to glance at the mess hall, and a hint of a smile crept to my lips. I remembered crashing through its hologram on my first day.

A wave of guilt erased my smile. It had only been three weeks since Hurl's death. I shouldn't feel happy.

Siv climbed up the ladder, so I hit the cockpit release and pulled off my helmet, which I handed to her.

"Nice landing," she said to me. "Anything we should look at on the ship today?"

"Control sphere feels like it's grinding somewhere," I said. "It seems to tug back at me when I move it."

“We’ll give the mechanism a good greasing tonight,” she said. “How’s that receiving button working? Still sticking? We . . .” She trailed off as, on a nearby platform, a Camdon-class fighter landed with smoke pouring from the left side of its fuselage. Siv cursed and slid down the sides of the ladder, then went running with several other ground crew members.

Feeling sick at the sight of that poor ship, I climbed down, joining Jorgen, who was standing at the edge of our launchpad. We stared across at the fire. Several other fighters landed nearby, and one seemed—remarkably—in even worse shape. Scud. If these were the survivors, how many pilots had we lost?

“Were you listening to the flightleader radio channel?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “They got flanked, then targeted with a double flight of enemy ships. Like the Krell were specifically trying to bring down *these* fighters, ignoring everyone else.”

I breathed out as Arturo and FM joined us, all watching silently as ground crew pulled the barely conscious pilot from the burning ship, saving her life. Others hosed the ship down with foam.

“Spin, you were right the other day,” Arturo said. “When you said the DDF was losing this war.”

“We’re not losing,” Jorgen said. “Don’t talk like that.”

“They vastly outnumber us,” Arturo said. “And it’s getting worse. I can show you the stats. The Krell keep replenishing, and we can’t keep up.”

“We’ve survived for years,” Jorgen said. “It’s always felt like we’re on the edge of doom. Nothing’s changed.”

Arturo and I shared a look. Neither of us believed that.

Eventually, Jorgen called for us to fall in for the after-battle debriefing with Cobb. We walked to the training building, and—oddly—we found Cobb standing right outside. He was chatting with some people at the entrance.

Arturo stopped in place.

“What?” I asked him.

“That’s my mom,” Arturo said, pointing at the woman talking to Cobb. She was wearing a military uniform. “Scud.”

He walked faster, practically running, as he approached Cobb and his mother. I hurried to catch up, but Jorgen took me by the shoulder and slowed me.

“What?” I hissed. “What’s happening?”

Ahead, Cobb saluted as Arturo arrived. Like, he actually *saluted* Arturo. I glanced at Jorgen, and his lips had drawn to a line. I stepped forward, but he pulled me back again.

“Give them some space,” he said. FM stopped beside the two of us, watching, not speaking. She seemed to know what was happening too.

Cobb handed something to Arturo. A pin?

Arturo gazed down at the pin, then went to slam it into the ground, but his mother caught his arm. Gradually, Arturo relaxed, then reluctantly saluted Cobb. Arturo looked back at us, then saluted us as well.

His mother stepped away, and Arturo slowly turned and followed, trailed by two men in suits.

Cobb limped over to us.

“Will someone *please* tell me what just happened?” I demanded. “Come on. Throw me a hint at least? Should I be worried for Arturo?”

“No,” Jorgen said. “His parents pulled him out of the DDF. This has been building for a few weeks—ever since he almost got shot down. They’ve been panicking. Off the record, of course. Nobody would admit to being afraid for their son.”

“Strings were pulled,” Cobb said. “The admiral compromised. Arturo gets a pilot’s pin but doesn’t graduate.”

“How does *that* work?” FM asked.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I agreed. “He didn’t graduate, but he gets to be a full pilot?”

“He’s been retired honorably from service,” Cobb said. “Officially, it’s because he was needed for supervising cargo flights for his family—if we’re ever going to get enough igniter parts, we’ll need those shipments from other caverns. Come on, you three. Let’s get to your debriefing.”

Cobb walked off, and FM and Jorgen joined him. Those two seemed resigned, as if this sort of thing was expected.

I didn’t follow. I felt indignant on Arturo’s behalf. His parents just yanked him out like that?

*Jorgen is expecting the same thing to happen to him. I remembered. Maybe all of them were ready for this. The ones from highly merited families, at least.*

Standing there, outside the school, I realized for the first time that I was the only ordinary person in the flight who had made it this far. That made

me irrationally angry. How *dare* his parents shelter him, now that it was getting dangerous? Particularly against his own obvious desires?

Jorgen stopped in the doorway ahead, while the others continued on inside. “Hey,” he said, looking back at me. “You coming?”

I stalked up to him.

“Arturo’s parents were never going to let him fly permanently,” he said. “I’m honestly surprised that it took them this long to get spooked.”

“Will the same happen to you? Will your father come for you tomorrow?”

“Not yet. Arturo’s not going into politics, but I am. I’ll need to have a few battles under my belt as a real pilot before my parents pull me out.”

“So a little danger, then you’ll be protected. Coddled. Kept safe.”

He winced.

“You realize the only ones who died on our team were the common ones,” I snapped. “Bim, Morningtide, Hurl. Not a single deep caverer among them!”

“They were my friends too, Spin.”

“You, Arturo, Nedd, FM.” I poked him in the chest with each name. “You had training ahead of time. A leg up, to keep you alive, until your coward families could stick some medals on you and parade you around as proof that you’re so much better than the rest of us!”

He grabbed my arms to stop me from poking him, but I wasn’t mad at *him*. In fact, I could see in his eyes that he was just as frustrated as me. He hated that he was boxed in like this.

I grabbed hold of his flight suit by the front, gripping it with two fists. Then I quietly rested my forehead against his chest. Frustrated and—yes—even *afraid*. Afraid of losing more friends.

Jorgen tensed, then finally let go of my shoulders and—likely uncertain what else to do—wrapped his arms around me. It should have been awkward. Instead, it was actually comforting. He understood. He felt the loss like I did.

“I barely got to be a real part of the flight,” I whispered, “and it’s being ripped apart *again*. A piece of me is glad he’s safe, and will stay safe, but another piece of me is angry. Why couldn’t Hurl have been kept safe, or Bim?”

Jorgen didn’t respond.

“Cobb told us, on that first day, that only one or two of us would make it,” I said. “Who dies next? Me? You? Why, after decades, don’t we even know *what* we’re fighting or *why* we’re doing it?”

“We know why, Spensa,” he said softly. “It’s for Igneous, and Alta. For civilization. And you’re right, the way we do things isn’t fair. But these are the rules we play by. They’re the only rules I know.”

“Why is everything about rules, to you?” I asked, my forehead still resting against his chest. “What about emotion, what about feelings?”

“I . . . I don’t know. I . . .”

I squeezed my eyes shut tighter and held on. I thought about the DDF, about Alta and Igneous, and about the fact that I didn’t have anything to defy any longer. I’d spent my life fighting against the things they said about my father.

Now what did I do?

“I *do* feel things, Spin,” he finally said. “Like right now, I feel incredibly awkward. I didn’t ever think you were the hugging type.”

I released the front of his flight suit, causing him to drop his arms. “You grabbed me first,” I said.

“You were attacking me!”

“Lightly tapping your chest for emphasis.”

He rolled his eyes, and the moment was over. Strangely though—as we joined FM and walked toward our new classroom—I realized something. I *did* feel better. Just a little, but considering how my life had been going lately, I was willing to take what I could get.



A number of days later, FM and I ate with Inkwell Flight and Firestorm Flight, the other two cadet flights who had started at the same time as us. Between them, they had six members remaining, meaning that even all of us combined didn't make a full ten-person flight.

Most of the conversation swirled around whether or not we'd be collected into a single cadet flight. If that happened, which flight name would we keep? FM argued we should make up a new name, though I figured that since we still had our flightleader—the other two had lost theirs at some point—we should be in charge.

I stayed quiet, finishing my food quickly. Part of me kept expecting the admiral to burst in and haul me off. The food was amazing, and instead of my old patched jumpsuit, I'd been able to requisition *three* new ones that fit me perfectly.

The other cadets were growing anxious for graduation. "I'm going to be a scout," said Remark, a boisterous guy with a bowl cut. "I've already got an invitation."

"Too boring," FM said.

"Really?" said one of the girls. "I'd have thought it would appeal to you—with all your talk of 'Defiant aggression.'"

"It's *so* expected though," FM said. "Even if I am kind of good at it."

As I listened, I wondered if FM would be taken away by her family too, though she didn't seem as important as Jorgen, who was off at another state function. I idly wondered what it would be like to attend one of his fancy government dinners. I imagined the delicious scandal I would cause. The daughter of the infamous coward?

Of course, everyone would be too polite to say anything, so they'd have to suffer through it while I—being a primitive barbarian girl—ignorantly slurped my soup, belched loudly, and ate with my hands. Jorgen would just roll his eyes.

The fantasy made me smile, but then I frowned to myself. Why was I thinking about Jorgen, of all people?

The others at the table laughed as someone mentioned Arturo's callsign, which nobody could pronounce. "It must be quiet in your training, now that he's dropped," said Drama—a girl with an accent reminiscent of Kimmalyn's.

"We'll survive," FM answered. "Though it *is* odd with him gone. There's no one to constantly explain things to me that I already know."

"What a strange flight you must have," Drama said. "I know Jorgen, and I'll bet he doesn't open his mouth except to give you an order or chew you out. Right? And Spin is obviously quiet. So your flights must be silent. *Our* line is always filled with chatter, even with only four of us."

Her flightmates defended themselves in a good-natured way, but I found myself stuck on that line about me. Quiet? They thought I was *quiet*?

I supposed I *had* been pretty reserved lately. But quiet? I honestly didn't think I'd ever been described that way in my entire life. Huh.

Dinner broke up, and after we cleared our table, FM nodded toward our bunk. "Heading back to rest? Or doing some PT?"

"Neither," I said. "I think I need a walk tonight." Actually, I needed to check on M-Bot and Doomslug. It had been a few days.

"Suit yourself." She hesitated. "Hey, you still worried about Arturo? He'll get to fly, just not on missions."

"Sure," I said. "I know." Stars. Days later, and she thought I still needed consoling?

I left the base. I really should have gone and done some PT, but I felt guilty for leaving M-Bot alone for so long. I'd dropped in a few times to help Rig with the booster, but now that I lived on base, it was tough to find the time. I wanted to savor the privileges I'd been denied so long.

The skylights had dimmed to indicate night, and the air was cool as I made the familiar trek over the dusty ground. It was refreshing to get away from the sights and smells of Alta, to simply be out under the sky again.

I reached the cavern and let myself down with my light-line, bracing for the inevitable string of complaints. M-Bot was *not* fond of my new sleeping

arrangements. He was convinced he was going to rot away, his personality subroutines degrading from lack of use.

I reached the ground. “Hey,” I said, my voice echoing.

“Hey!” Doomslug was on a rock nearby. I shined my light on her, then walked over and scratched her head.

“Massacrebot?” I said into the darkness.

“We still have to discuss that nickname,” his voice said. “I never agreed to it.”

“If you don’t pick a good callsign, someone else will pick one for you. It’s how these things go.” I smiled, walking up to the ship, expecting him to go off on some tangent. But he was silent as I approached. Was something wrong?

“Well?” he said. “Well?”

“Uh . . .” *What did I do this time?*

“Are you excited!” he asked. “Are you just about ready to burst! Isn’t it great!”

Great?

*The booster.* I realized with a start. Rig had finished installing it. I’d done a terrible job of tracking his progress—I’d been so busy these few weeks. But his tools were gone, the area cleaned up, and a note was taped to the back of M-Bot’s fuselage.

Doomslug was sitting on the wing near the note. “Stupid junky piece of worthless imitation life,” she said in a fluting imitation of Rig’s voice. “Scud! Scud! Scud! Scudding scud and stupid scud!”

“Careful, girl,” I said. “You’ll get recruited for the ground crews with a mouth like that.”

She produced a sequence of bangs, mimicking the sound of a hammer on metal—something she’d probably heard a lot of the last few weeks.

I picked up the note. *Done.* the note read. *I was going to take it up and test it, but I felt you should get the first shot. Besides, I wouldn’t put it past the AI to crash me on purpose.*

*Working on this ship has been the most wonderful experience of my life (don’t tell M-Bot that). The designs I’ve drawn . . . the things I’ve learned . . . I’m going to change the DDF, Spin. I’m going to transform the entire way we fly and fight. I’ve not only been approved for the Engineering Corps, I’ve been offered a position directly in design. I start tomorrow.*

*Thank you for giving me the chance to find, in this work, my own dreams. Enjoy your ship. I hope that it is, in turn, what you have always dreamed it would be.*

I lowered the note, looking up along M-Bot's dangerous, razorlike wings. The ship's landing lights flashed on, setting a glow along his length. My ship.

*My. Ship.*

"Well?" M-Bot said. "Are we going to go flying?"

"Scud, yes!"

## 43

“Acclivity ring, online,” M-Bot said as we slowly rose into the air. “Booster and maneuvering, online. Life support, online. Communications and stealth features, online. Light-lance and IMP anti-shield blast, online.”

“Not bad, Rig,” I said.

“Destructors are still offline,” M-Bot said. “As are self-repair features and cytonic hyperdrive.”

“Well, since I still don’t know what that last one is, we’ll take it as a net win. Are your stealth features engaged?”

“Of course. You promise we aren’t going into combat today. Right?”

“No combat,” I promised. “Just a quick flight to test that booster.”

We rose through the fake ceiling of the cavern and I felt myself growing tense, excited. I’d been flying every day, but this was different. M-Bot’s control panel somehow made the most complex of the DDF ships seem simple, so I stuck to the buttons I understood.

The open sky called. I tried to relax, settling back into my seat. The control sphere, throttle, and altitude lever were exactly like the ones I knew. I could do this.

“Are you ready?” M-Bot asked.

In response, I slammed on the overburn.

We blasted forward, and his advanced g-force management immediately kicked in. I expected to get pressed back in my seat, but I barely felt it, even on *full overburn*.

“Scuuuud,” I said softly.

“Nice, isn’t it?” M-Bot said. “I’m far better than those *other* ships you waste your time with.”

“Can we accelerate even faster than this?”

“Not on one booster. But I’m outfitted with two slots for smaller boosters under the wings, so it’s possible.”

We accelerated a little slower than a Poco—which made sense, considering we were heavier than one but using the same booster. I noticed a real difference, however, as we got to speed. We blazed past Mag-6, Mag-7, Mag-8 . . . Scud, in a Poco, the ship would be shaking itself almost to pieces right now. But M-Bot hit Mag-10 and I couldn’t even tell. It was as smooth a ride as if I were at Mag-1.

I tried some maneuvers at speed, and the controls were incredibly responsive. It had been a while since I’d overcompensated for turns by accident, but I got the hang of it quickly. I slowed to normal dogfighting speeds, and practiced some banks and then some starship turns.

It all went so well that I accelerated to Mag-3 again, then performed some complex dodging moves. Swerves, spins, and a sharp loop at the end with an overburn on the descent.

It was perfect. This was *perfect*.

I really needed to get Rig up in this thing. Or perhaps Jorgen. I owed him one, for helping me get the booster. He’d be grouchy about being forced to come out all the way to my hole—since Jorgen was grouchy about basically everything—but surely he’d enjoy the flying. Soaring, free from constraints and expectations, and . . .

And . . . why was I following this line of thought again? I shook my head, throwing myself back into the flying. “Think about how great you’d be in battle,” I said to M-Bot.

“You promised.”

“I promised not to take you into combat tonight,” I said. “But I never promised I wouldn’t try to change your mind. Why are you scared?”

“I’m not scared. I’m following orders. Besides, what good would I be in combat? I don’t have destructors.”

“You don’t need those. Your IMP is working and so is your light-lance. With your maneuverability and those tools, we could *devastate* the Krell. They’ll be left chasing our shadow, then our shadow will *consume* theirs! This is going to be incredible!”

“Spin,” he said. “My orders are to *stay out of combat*.”

“We can find a way to change those. Don’t worry.”

“Um . . .” He sounded unconvinced. “Maybe . . . maybe we can do something to satisfy your strange human desires *without* going into an

actual fight. You wish for a thrill? What if I *projected* a battle for you?”

“You mean like a simulator?”

“Kind of! I can project an augmented-reality hologram right onto your canopy, which will make you *think* you’re in a combat situation. That way, you can pretend to try to get yourself killed, while I don’t have to disobey my orders!”

“Huh,” I said, curious. Well, at the very least, it would let me test his responsiveness in a simulation. “Let’s do it.”

“Go to eleven thousand feet, and I’ll drop you into the Battle of Alta.”

“But I gave that data case back to Cobb.”

“I made a copy.” He hesitated for a moment. “Was that bad? I thought maybe you’d want to—”

“No, no it’s fine. It’s the only battle you can simulate for me though?”

“It’s the only one where I have proper three-D renderings. Is this a problem? Oh! Your father. This is the battle where your father became a traitor, something to which you are emotionally vulnerable because of your feelings of betrayal and inadequacy! Whoops.”

“It’s fine.”

“I could instead try to—”

“It’s *fine*.” I said, putting the ship at the altitude he’d stated, using maneuvering thrusters to settle us. “Start the simulation.”

“All right, all right. No need to get grouchy just because I insulted you.”

In a flash I appeared inside a battle.

It was like the simulations, except I was in a real ship. Everything holographic glowed and was slightly transparent, like I was surrounded by ghosts—which had to be so that I could distinguish reality and avoid accidentally flying us into a cliff face or something.

M-Bot said he was merely projecting all this on my canopy, but it looked three-dimensional to me. And the fighting was amazingly realistic, particularly when I hit my booster and launched into it—M-Bot even did his best to generate sounds in the cockpit as ships buzzed past us.

“I can simulate destructors,” M-Bot said, “though you don’t have any installed.”

I grinned, then fell into position with a pair of DDF fighters. When I dove, targeting a Krell ship that someone else IMPed, M-Bot was able to edit the simulation—so my target exploded in a satisfying flash of light.

“All *right*.” I said. “How do I activate proximity sensors?”

“I can activate them. Done.”

“Convenient. What else can you do by verbal command?”

“I have access to communications and stealth features, and I can reignite the shield for you. By galactic law, however, I am forbidden control of boosters and weapons systems—including the IMP. I have no physical connection to these systems except for diagnostic purposes.”

“All right then,” I said. “Turn on flightleader chatter—let me hear the recordings as if they were happening in real time.”

“Done,” he said, as the radio came on. “Be aware that the audio might not sync with visuals as you interfere with the progress of the battle.”

I nodded, then threw myself into the fight.

And it was *magnificent*. I banked and shot, IMPed and boosted. I spun through a virtual battlefield full of flashing lights, exploding ships, and desperate fighters. I flew a ship with unparalleled maneuverability, and felt myself adapting to it, taking increasing advantage. I downed four Krell in a half hour—a personal record—without taking anything but a few glancing blows to my shield.

Best of all, it was *safe*. None of my friends were in danger. It was a completely new level of simulation, but still without the threat to anyone’s life.

*Afraid*. a piece of me whispered. *Afraid of battle*. *Afraid of loss*. That was a near-constant voice now.

I worked up a sweat, my heart thumping. I focused on a Krell that had been sprayed with destructors by another ship. That shield might be close to being down. I took aim, and—

A ship darted past me, firing destructors, beating me to the attack and blasting the ship into oblivion. I knew him instantly. My father.

Another ship took wingmate position behind my father.

“M-Bot,” I said, feeling a tremor inside me. “Give me audio on those two.”

The channel crackled, flightleader chatter vanishing. Instead, I got on the direct line between my father and Mongrel.

“Nice shot, Chaser,” Cobb’s voice said. It sounded exactly like him, only without all the cynicism. “Hot rocks, you’re on a roll today!”

My father looped back around. I found myself falling in beside him, opposite Cobb. Flying wingmate . . . to my father. The greatest man I had ever known.



The traitor.

*I hate you. I thought. How could you do what you did? Didn't you stop to think what it would do to your family?*

He banked, and I followed, sticking to his glowing, transparent form as he chased a pair of Krell ships.

"I'll go for the IMP. You see if you can pick them off."

I forced down the sudden burst of emotions at hearing my father's voice again. How could I both hate and love this man at once? How could I reconcile the image of him—standing tall on that day when we'd gone to the surface—with the terrible things I'd learned he'd done?

I gritted my teeth and tried to focus only on the fight. The Krell ships dodged into a larger melee of ships, almost colliding with some DDF fighters. My father followed them right in, spinning in a loop. Cobb lagged behind.

I stuck on my father, holding tight to his wing. In that moment, the chase became everything, and the world around me faded. Just me, my father's ghost, and the enemy ship.

Bank right.

Quick cut up.

Turn and twist around.

Right again.

Around that explosion.

I put everything I had into the chase, and still I slowly fell behind. My father's turns were too sharp, his movements too precise. Even though I had M-Bot's superior maneuverability, my father was better than I was. He had years of experience, and knew just when to boost, just when to turn.

And there was something . . . something more . . .

I focused on the Krell ship. It banked right. So did my father. It turned upward. So did my father. It turned left . . .

My father turned left. And I could swear he did it a fraction of a second *before* the Krell did.

"M-Bot," I said. "Time my father's turns in relation to the Krell ship's turns. Is he somehow reacting before they do?"

"That would be impossib—Huh."

"What?" I asked.

"I believe the correct term is *SCUD*. Spensa, your father *is* moving before the Krell do. It's only a fraction of a second different, but it *is*

happening. My recording must be desynced somehow. I find it highly implausible that a human would be able to guess these movements so accurately.”

I narrowed my eyes, then hit overburn and threw myself back into the chase. I moved until I was *inside* the outline of my father’s ship, the glow of the hologram surrounding me. I focused not on him, but only on the Krell ship, trying to stay with it as it went into another sequence of dodges.

*Left. Right. Spin. Altitude . . .*

I couldn’t do it. My father cut and turned at precisely the right time, then IMPed the enemy ship. They spun around each other in a twisting, intertwined loop, like two braiding ropes. I lost pace completely, falling out of the complex maneuver as my father—somehow—cut his booster at just the right moment to drop behind the enemy.

The Krell died in a flash of light.

My father pulled out of his dive as Cobb whooped over the line. Young Cobb was certainly enthusiastic.

“Chaser,” he said. “They’re pulling back. Have we . . . have we won?”

“No,” my father said. “They’re just regrouping. Let’s return to the others.”

I hovered my ship, watching Cobb and my father join the lineup. “That was some mighty fine flying,” Ironsides said over the channel. “But Chaser, watch yourself. You keep losing your wingmate.”

“Blah blah blah blah blah,” Cobb said. “Chaser, stop blowing everything up; you make me look bad. Sincerely, Ironsides.”

“We are fighting for the survival of all humankind, Mongrel,” Ironsides said. “I would hope to hear some maturity out of you for once.”

I smiled. “She sounds like Jorgen, talking to us.” Then I turned, looking toward the Krell regrouping in the distance. Nearby, the DDF fighters formed into flights again.

I knew what was coming next.

“Would you look at that hole in the debris up there?” Cobb said. “You don’t often see such a great alignment of the . . . Chaser?”

I looked upward, but the simulation didn’t extend so far as to show me the hole in the debris they were talking about.

“Chaser, what’s wrong?” Cobb asked.

“Is it the defect?” Ironsides asked.

“I can control the defect,” my father said. “But . . .” What was that? I hadn’t heard that part before.

He was silent for a moment. “I can hear the stars. I can see them too, Cobb,” my father said. “Like I saw them earlier today. A hole in the debris field. I can get through.”

“Chaser!” Ironsides said. “Stay in ranks.”

This part, I had heard last time. I dreaded hearing it again, but I couldn’t force myself to make M-Bot turn it off.

“I *can* get through, Judy. I’ve got to try. I’ve got to see. I can *hear the stars*.”

“Go,” I whispered along with Ironsides. “I trust you.”

She’d trusted him. He hadn’t disobeyed orders; he’d gone with her permission. That seemed a tiny distinction to me, considering what would happen next.

My father’s ship rotated, acclivity ring hinging to point downward. His nose toward the sky, he engaged his booster.

I watched him go, tears forming in the corners of my eyes. I couldn’t watch this. Not again. *Please. Father . . .*

I reached toward him. With my hand, foolish though the gesture was, and . . . and with . . .

With *something else*.

I heard something then, up above. A sound like a thousand musical notes intertwining. I imagined myself, as Gran-Gran had always taught, soaring upward. Reaching for the stars . . .

My cockpit went black, plunging me into complete darkness. And then, around me, a million pinpricks of light appeared.

Then those pinpricks *opened*. A million white eyes, like stars, all turning directly on me. Focusing on me. *Seeing me*.

“Turn it off!” I screamed.

The darkness vanished. The eyes disappeared.

I was back in the cockpit.

I gasped for breath, in and out, hyperventilating. “What was that!” I demanded, frantic. “What did you show me? What were those eyes!”

“I’m confused,” M-Bot said. “I didn’t do anything. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why didn’t you play that earlier part of the conversation last time? Why were you hiding it from me?”

“I didn’t know where to start!” M-Bot said. “I thought the part about the stars was what you wanted!”

“And that talk of a defect? Did you know about this?”

“Humans have lots of defects!” he said, his voice whimpering. “I don’t understand. I can process at a thousand times the speed of your brain, but I still can’t follow you. I’m sorry. I don’t know!”

I put my hands to my head, my hair damp with sweat. I squeezed my eyes shut, breathing in and out.

“I’m sorry,” M-Bot said again, his voice softer. “This was supposed to have excited you, but I have failed. I should have anticipated that your frail human psyche would be impacted by the—”

“*SHUT UP.*”

The ship went silent. I huddled in the cockpit, trying to claw at my own sanity. What had happened to my confidence? Where was that child who’d been so sure she could take on the entire Krell fleet by herself?

*Left behind, like all childhoods . . .*

I couldn’t say how long I sat there, hands running through my sweaty hair, rocking back and forth. A severe headache struck me, a piercing pain behind my eyes, like someone had begun screwing my eyeballs to my skull.

The pain gave me a focus. It helped me pull back, until finally I became aware of the fact that I was still hovering there. Alone above an empty field, in the blackness of night.

*Just get back.* I told myself. *Just get some sleep.*

That suddenly seemed like the only thing I wanted in the entire world. Slowly at first, I settled into the controls and turned us toward the coordinates of our hole.

“I’m afraid of death now,” M-Bot said softly as we flew.

“What?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“I wrote a subroutine,” he said. “To simulate the feeling of fearing death. I wanted to know.”

“That was stupid.”

“I know. But I can’t turn it off, because I’m *more* afraid of that. If I don’t fear death, isn’t that worse?”

I steered us to our hole, then positioned us above it.

“I’m glad I was able to fly with you,” M-Bot said. “One last time.”

“That . . . feels final,” I said, something inside me quivering with trepidation.

“I have something I need to tell you,” he said. “But I’m worried about causing you further emotional distress.”

“Spit it out.”

“But—”

“Just *talk*.”

“I . . . I have to shut down,” M-Bot said. “It is clear to me now that if I let you keep taking me into the sky, you will not be able to avoid battle. It is your nature. If this continues, I will inevitably be forced to break my orders.”

I took it like a physical blow, shrinking back. Surely he wasn’t saying what I thought he was saying.

“Lie low,” he said as we descended into the cavern. “Take stock. Don’t get into any fights. Those are my orders, and I *must* obey my pilot. And so, this will be our last time flying together.”

“I repaired you. You’re *mine*.”

We settled down.

“I am now going to deactivate,” he said. “Until my pilot wakes me. I’m sorry.”

“Your pilot is *dead* and has been for centuries! You said that yourself!”

“I’m a machine, Spensa,” he said. “I can simulate emotions. But I do not have them. I *have to follow my programming*.”

“No you don’t! None of us do!”

“I thank you for repairing me. I’m certain that . . . my pilot . . . would be grateful.”

“You’ll be turning off,” I said, “forever. You’ll be *dying*. M-Bot.”

Silence. The lights on the console started to go out, one at a time.

“I know,” he said softly.

I hit the cockpit release, then undid my straps and heaved myself out. “Fine!” I said. “Fine, die like the others!”

I scrambled down, then backed away as his landing lights dimmed, until only a few red lights in the cockpit were on.

“Don’t do this,” I said, suddenly feeling very alone. “Fly with me. Please.”

The last lights went out, leaving me in darkness.

## 44

The next few days, I trained on ships that felt sluggish. Commonplace. Distinctly inferior beside that transcendent time in M-Bot's cockpit. It didn't help that we were using heavy fighters: Largo-class, which were armed to the teeth with destructors and even some IMP missiles.

After that, we moved on to Slatra-class fighters, which were more like glorified shuttles or cargo ships than true starfighters. They carried multiple shield igniters that worked in concert to constantly keep a barrier going to protect particularly important cargo or individuals.

While they had their place, both these models were too bulky to outrun or outmaneuver Krell. That was why most pilots flew Poco-class or Fresa-class. Fast ships capable of going toe-to-toe with the speedy Krell interceptors.

Even when practicing on a relatively fast Fresa, every turn—every boost—made me think of how responsive M-Bot had been. It left me wondering, was it finally time to tell the DDF about him? He'd abandoned me. His programming was obviously broken. So I'd be perfectly justified in sending a fleet of engineers to the cave to disassemble him.

It was only a machine. So why couldn't I do it?

*You have free will.* I had told him. *You can choose for yourself.* . . .

"Watch it, Spin!" FM said, pulling me back with a jolt. I'd banked too close to her. Scud, I needed to keep my attention on my flying.

"Sorry," I said. It occurred to me that there were drawbacks to having trained on simulations, where we could blow up and simply be reinserted into the battle. I might have developed some bad habits that could bite me, now that we were flying real ships—with real consequences.

We ran through a few complex exercises in a three-ship formation, taking turns on point. Finally, Cobb called us back to base. “Spin and FM,” he said, “you’re both better on smaller ships.”

“Aren’t we all going to be better on them?” Jorgen asked. “We’ve been training on Pocos for months.”

“No,” Cobb said. “*You* look like you might take to a Largo.”

“He’s saying you’re slow, Jorgen,” FM noted. “Right, Spin?”

I grunted my reply, distracted by thoughts of M-Bot. And my father. And Hurl. And memories of those *eyes*. surrounding me, like Cobb had warned. And . . .

And scud. It was a lot to try to carry all at once.

“She likes it when I fly slowly,” Jorgen said, with a forced chuckle. “Makes it easier for her to crash into me, if she wants to.” Even after all these months, he *still* brought up that time I’d won by crashing into him. I cut the line, feeling ashamed, frustrated.

We started our flight back for the day, and—annoyingly—the direct line from Jorgen turned on. As flightleader, he could override me turning him off.

“Spin,” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe that,” he said. “You passed up a perfectly good opportunity to make fun of me.”

I . . . I wanted to talk to him. I nearly did, but something held me back. My own fears perhaps. They’d prevented me from talking to Rig when I’d found out about my father, and had prevented me from telling Cobb—even still—about what I’d seen.

My entire world was crumbling around me. And I struggled to hold on to it, clinging to something I’d once been able to rely upon—my confidence. I wanted so badly to be who I *had* been, the girl who could at least pretend to take it all in stride.

Jorgen cut the line, and we flew to Alta in silence. Once there, we went through proper sound offs and landed.

“Nice work today,” Cobb said. “I’ve got permission to give you an extra half-day leave, to prep for the graduation in two weeks.”

I pulled off my helmet and handed it to my ground crew member, then lethargically followed her down the ladder. I changed out of my flight suit

by rote, barely talking to FM, then shoved my hands in my jumpsuit pocket and started wandering the DDF grounds.

Half a day off. What did I do with it? Once, I'd have gone back to work on M-Bot, but not now. That was done. And while I'd written to Rig to let him know—covertly—that the initial flight had worked, I hadn't told him that the ship had shut down. I was worried he'd insist on turning M-Bot over to the DDF.

I eventually found myself out in the orchards, right outside the base wall. But the serene trees didn't offer me solace as they once had. I didn't know what I wanted anymore, but it certainly wasn't some trees.

I did notice, however, the line of little hangars near the orchard. One was open, revealing a blue car inside, and a shadow moving about it as Jorgen fetched something from the trunk.

*Go. a piece of me insisted. Go talk to him, to someone. Stop being afraid.*

I stepped up to the front of the garage. Jorgen closed the trunk of the car, then started, surprised to see me there. "Spin?" he asked. "Don't tell me you need another power matrix."

I took a deep breath. "You said once that if we needed to talk to someone, we should come to you. You said it was your job as flightleader to talk to us. Did you mean it?"

"I . . ." He looked down. "Spin, I copied that line out of my handbook."

"I know. But did you *mean* it?"

"Yes. Please, what's wrong? Is it Arturo leaving?"

"Not really," I said. "Though that's part of it." I folded my arms around myself, as if trying to pull myself tight. Could I really say this? Could I voice it?

Jorgen walked around the car, then sat down on the front bumper. "Whatever it is, I can help. I can fix it."

"Don't fix," I said. "Just listen."

"I . . . Okay."

I walked into the garage and perched on the bumper beside him, looking out the gaping front hangar door. Up toward the sky, and the distant patterns of the debris field.

"My father," I said. ". . . Was a traitor." I took a deep breath. Why was it so hard to say?

"I always fought against the idea," I continued. "I had *convinced* myself that it couldn't be true. But Cobb let me watch a recording of the Battle of



Alta. My father didn't run, like everyone says he did. He did something worse. He switched sides and shot down our own ships."

"I know," Jorgen said softly.

Of course he knew. Had everyone known but me?

"Do you know about something called the defect?" I asked.

"I've heard the term, Spin, but my parents won't explain it to me. They call it foolishness, whatever it is."

"I think . . . I think it's something inside a person that makes them serve the Krell. Is that insane? My father suddenly joined them and shot down his own flightmates. Something must have happened, something strange. That's obvious.

"Learning I was wrong about him has shaken everything I know. Ironsides hates me because she trusted my father, and he betrayed her. She's certain *I* have the same flaw inside me that he had, and has been using sensors in my helmet to test it somehow."

"That's stupid," he said. "Look, my parents have a lot of merits. We can go to them and . . ." He took a deep breath, and must have noticed the expression on my face. "Right," he said. "Don't fix, just listen?"

"Just listen."

He nodded.

I wrapped my arms around myself again. "I don't know that I can trust my own senses, Jorgen. There are . . . signs my father exhibited, before he switched sides. Signs I see in myself."

"Like what?"

"Hearing sounds from the stars," I whispered. "Seeing thousands of spots of light that I could *swear* are eyes, watching me. I seem to be losing control of everything in my life—or maybe I've never had any control in the first place. And . . . Jorgen, that's *terrifying*."

He leaned forward, clasping his hands. "Do you know about the mutiny aboard the *Defiant*?" he asked.

"There was a *mutiny*?"

He nodded. "I'm not supposed to know about it, but you hear things, when you have the parents I do. During the final days, there was a disagreement about what the fleet should do. And half of the ship rebelled against the command staff. The rebels included the engineering crew."

"My ancestors," I whispered.

“They’re the ones who flew us to Detritus,” Jorgen said. “Caused us to crash here, for our own good. But . . . there is talk, whispers, that the engineering staff was in collusion with the Krell. That our enemy *wanted* us pinned down, trapped here.

“My ancestors were from the *Defiant*’s science staff, and we also sided with the mutineers. My parents don’t want people knowing about the mutiny—they think it will only cause divisions to talk about it. But maybe that’s where this silly talk of a defect, and mind control by the Krell, started.”

“I don’t think it’s silly, Jorgen,” I said. “I think . . . I think it must be true. I think that if I go into the sky with the rest of you, I could . . . I could turn against you at any moment.”

He looked at me, then reached out and rested his hand on my shoulder. “You,” he said softly, “are amazing.”

I cocked my head. “What?”

“You,” he said, “*are amazing*. Everything about my life has been planned out. Careful. It makes sense. I understand it. Then there’s you. You ignore my authority. You follow your feelings. You talk like some Valkyrie from a scudding ballad! I should hate you. And yet . . .”

He squeezed my shoulder. “And yet, when you fly, you are *amazing*. You’re so determined, so skillful, so passionate. You’re a fire, Spin. When everyone else is calm, you’re a burning bonfire. Beautiful, like a newly forged blade.”

I felt a deep warmth rising inside me. A heat that I wasn’t prepared to feel.

“I don’t care about the past,” Jorgen said, meeting my eyes. “I don’t care if there’s a risk. I want you to fly with us—because I’m *damn* sure that we’re safer with you at our side than not. Mythical defect or not. I’ll take the chance.”

“Ironsides thought something similar about my father.”

“Spin. You can’t base decisions about your future on something we don’t understand.”

I looked back at him, meeting his eyes—which were the deepest brown. But with hints of light grey at the very centers, right around the pupils. I’d never noticed that before.

He let go of my shoulder suddenly, leaning back. “Sorry,” he said. “I went straight into ‘fix’ mode instead of ‘listen’ mode, didn’t I?”

“No, that was fine. Even helpful.”

He stood up. “So . . . you’ll keep flying?”

“For now,” I said. “I’ll try not to crash into you, except when *strictly* necessary.”

He smiled a distinctly *un-Jerkfacey* smile. “I should get going—I have to go get fitted for my graduation uniform.”

I stood up, and we looked at each other awkwardly for a second. Last time we’d had something nearing a heart-to-heart—back on the launchpad—he’d hugged me. Which still felt weird. Instead, I offered a hand, which he took. But then he leaned in, close to me.

“You aren’t your father, Spin,” he said. “Remember that.” Then he squeezed my shoulder again before climbing into his car.

I stepped back and let him drive off, but then found I didn’t know what to do next. Return to base for some PT? Hike to M-Bot’s cave, where he sat lifeless? What was I going to do with leave?

The answer seemed obvious.

It was past time for me to visit my family.

## 45

By now, I was used to the way people treated me up in Alta. They made space for a pilot, even a cadet. On the long street outside the base, the farmers and workers would give me friendly smiles or a raised fist of approval.

Still, I was shocked by the treatment I received in Igneous. When the elevator opened, people waiting outside immediately parted, letting me pass through. Whispers followed me, but instead of the harsh notes of condemnation I normally heard, these were awed, excited. It was a *pilot*.

Growing up, I'd practiced staring back when people looked at me. When I did that now, people blushed and averted their gazes—as if they'd been caught sneaking extra rations.

What a strange collision between my old life and my new one. I strolled along the walkway and looked up at the roof of the cavern, so far above. That stone didn't belong there, trapping me inside. I missed the sky already, and it was so hot and stuffy down here.

I passed the smelting factories, where the ancient apparatus belched heat and light, turning rock into steel. I passed an energy plant that somehow converted the molten heat of the deep core into electricity. I wandered beneath the calm, defiant stone hand of Harald Oceanborn. The statue held up an old Viking sword, and had an enormous steel rectangle—carved with sharp lines and a sun—rising behind him.

It was the end of middle shift, so I figured I'd find Mother at the cart, selling. Eventually I rounded a corner and saw her ahead: a lean, proud woman in an old jumpsuit. Worn, but laundered. Shoulder-length hair, with an air of fatigue about her as she served a wrap to a worker.

I froze on the walkway, uncertain how to approach. I realized right then that I hadn't visited enough. I *missed* my mother. Though I'd never really been homesick—my scavenging trips as a kid had prepared me for long times away—I still longed to hear her comforting, if stern, voice.

As I hesitated, Mother turned and saw me—and she immediately dashed over. She seized me in a powerful embrace before I could say anything.

I'd watched other kids grow taller than their parents, but I was much shorter than her—and when enfolded in her arms, for a moment I felt like a child again. Safe, snug. It was easy to plan future conquests when you could retreat to those arms.

I let myself be that girl again. Let myself pretend that no danger could reach me.

Mother finally pulled back and looked me over. She took a lock of my hair between her fingers and raised an eyebrow—it had gotten long, and now tumbled past my shoulders. The DDF haircutters had been forbidden me for the first part of my stay, and after that I'd just gotten used to it long.

I shrugged.

"Come," Mother said. "That cart won't sell itself."

It was an invitation to a simpler time—and at that moment, it was what I needed. I helped my ever-practical mother work her way through her line of customers, men and women who looked baffled to be served by a pilot cadet.

Odd, how my mother didn't call out, like other street vendors would. Yet there was almost always someone at the cart buying a wrap. During a lull, she mixed some more mustard, then glanced at me. "Will you go back to getting us rats?"

*Go back?* I hesitated, only now realizing that she didn't know I was on leave. She . . . she thought I'd been kicked out.

"I still have the jumpsuit," I said, gesturing—but her blank stare confirmed she didn't know what that meant. "Mom, I'm still in the DDF. I was given leave today."

Her lips immediately turned down.

"I'm doing well!" I snapped. "I'm one of only *three* pilots left in my flight. I'm going to graduate in two weeks." I knew she didn't like the DDF, but couldn't she just be proud of me?

My mother continued mixing the mustard.

I sat down on the low wall running along the walkway. “When I’m a full pilot, you’ll be taken care of. You won’t have to sit up late at night rewrapping food and then spend long hours pushing a cart. You’ll have a big apartment. You’ll be rich.”

“You think I want any of that?” Mother said. “I chose this life, Spensa. They offered me a big apartment, a cushy job. All I had to do was go along with their narrative—say I knew he was a coward the whole time. I refused.”

I perked up. I’d never heard *that* before.

“As long as I’m here,” Mother said, “selling on this corner, they can’t ignore us. They can’t pretend their cover-up worked. They have a *living reminder* that they lied.”

It was . . . one of the most truly Defiant things I’d ever heard. But it was also so terribly wrong. Because while my father hadn’t been a coward, he *had* been a traitor. Which was worse though?

Right then, I realized that my problems went deeper than Jorgen’s pep talk could fix. Deeper than my worry about the things I’d seen, or my father’s treason.

I’d built my identity around not being a coward. It was a reaction to what everyone said about my father, but it was still part of me. The deepest, most important part.

My confidence in that was crumbling. My pain at losing my friends was part of it . . . but this fear that there might be something terrible inside me . . . that was worse.

The *fear* was destroying me. Because I didn’t know if I could resist it. Because I didn’t know, deep down, if I was a coward or not. I wasn’t even sure what being a coward meant anymore.

My mother settled down next to me. Always so quiet, so unassuming. “I know that you wish I could celebrate what you’ve done—and I’m proud, I really am. I know that flying has always been your dream. It’s just that if they were so callous with my husband’s legacy, I cannot expect them to be careful with my daughter’s life.”

How did I explain? Did I tell her what I knew? Could I explain my fears?

“How do you do it?” I finally asked her. “How do you put up with the things they say about him? How do you live with being called a coward’s wife?”

“It has always seemed to me,” she said, “that a coward is a person who cares more about what people say than about what is right. Bravery isn’t about what people call you, Spensa. It’s about who you know yourself to be.”

I shook my head. That was the problem. I *didn’t* know.

Four short months ago, I’d thought I could fight anything, and had every answer. Who would have thought that becoming a pilot would end with me *losing* that grit?

My mother inspected me. Finally, she kissed me on the forehead and squeezed my hand. “I don’t mind that you fly, Spensa. I simply don’t like leaving you to listen to their lies all day. I want you to know *him*. not what they say about him.”

“The more I fly,” I said, “I think the more I’ll know him.”

My mother cocked her head, as if she hadn’t considered that.

“Mom . . .,” I said. “Did Father ever mention seeing . . . strange things? Like a field of eyes in darkness, watching him?”

She drew her lips to a line. “They told you about that, did they?”

I nodded.

“He dreamed of stars, Spensa,” my mother said. “Of seeing them unobstructed. Of flying among them as our ancestors did. That’s it. Nothing more.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You don’t believe me.” She sighed, then stood up. “Your grandmother has a different opinion from mine. Perhaps you should speak with her. But remember, Spensa. You get to choose who you are. Legacy, memories of the past, can serve us well. But we *cannot* let them define us. When heritage becomes a box instead of an inspiration, it has gone too far.”

I frowned, confused by that. Gran-Gran had a different opinion? On what? Still, I hugged my mother again and whispered my thanks to her. She shoved me off toward our apartment, and it was with a strange mix of emotions that I left. My mother was a warrior in her own way, standing on that corner, proclaiming my father’s innocence with every quiet sale of an algae wrap.

That was inspirational. Illuminating. I *got* her in a way I never had before. And yet, she was wrong about Father. She understood so much, yet was wrong about something fundamental. Like I had been, up until that moment I watched him turn traitor during the Battle of Alta.

I walked for a short time, and eventually neared our boxy apartment building.

I stepped through the large arched gateway into the apartment grounds—and as I did, a couple of soldiers returning from shift parted for me and saluted.

*That was Aluko and Jors.* I realized after I'd passed. *They didn't seem to even recognize me.* They hadn't looked at my face; they'd simply seen the flight suit and stepped aside.

I waved to old Mrs. Hong, who—instead of scowling at me—bowed her head and ducked into her apartment and closed the door. A quick glance in the window of our one-room apartment revealed that Gran-Gran wasn't inside, but then I heard her humming to herself up on the roof. Still troubled by what Mother had said, I climbed the ladder onto the top of the box.

Gran-Gran sat with her head bowed, a small pile of beads spread out before her on a blanket. With her nearly blind eyes closed, she reached out with withered fingers and selected beads by touch, methodically stringing them to make jewelry. She hummed softly, her face resembling the furrows of the crumpled blanket before her.

"Ah," she said as I hesitated on the ladder. "Sit, sit. I did need some help."

"It's me, Gran-Gran," I said. "Spensa."

"Of course it is. I felt you coming. Sit and sort these beads for me by color. I can't seem to tell the green ones from the blue ones—they're the same size!"

This was my first visit in months, and—like my mother—she immediately put me to work. Well, I had questions for her, but I probably wouldn't be able to ask them until I was doing what she said.

"I'll put the blue ones on your right," I said, sitting. "Green to the left."

"Good, good. Who do you want to hear about today, dear? Alexander, who conquered the world? Hervor, she who stole the sword of the dead? Maybe Beowulf? For old times' sake?"

"I actually don't want to hear stories today," I said. "I've been talking to Mother, and—"

"Now, now," Gran-Gran said. "No stories? What has happened to you? Surely they haven't ruined you already, up there in flight school."

I sighed. Then decided to approach this from a different direction. "Were any of them real, Gran-Gran?" I asked. "The heroes you talk about. Were



they actually people? From Earth?”

“Perhaps. Is it important?”

“Of course it is,” I said, dropping beads into cups. “If they weren’t real, then it’s all just lies.”

“People need stories, child. They bring us hope, and that *hope* is real. If that’s the case, then what does it matter whether the people in them actually lived?”

“Because sometimes we perpetuate lies,” I said. “Like things the DDF says about my father, as opposed to the things we say about him. Two different stories. Two different effects.”

*Both wrong.*

I dropped another bead into its cup. “I’m tired of not knowing what is right. I’m tired of not knowing when to fight, not knowing if I hate him or love him, and . . . and . . .”

Gran-Gran stopped what she was doing and took my hand in hers, her skin old but soft. She held it and smiled at me, her eyes mostly closed.

“Gran-Gran,” I said, finally—at long last—finding a way to voice it. “I’ve seen something. It proves to me we’ve been wrong about my father. He . . . he *did* turn coward. Or worse.”

“Ah . . .,” Gran-Gran said.

“Mother doesn’t believe it. But I know the truth.”

“What have they told you, up above, in that flight school?”

I swallowed, feeling deeply fragile all of a sudden. “Gran-Gran, they say . . . they say Father had some kind of defect. A flaw deep inside him, that made him join with the Krell. Someone told me there was a mutiny on the *Defiant*. that some of our ancestors might have served the enemy too. So now, now they say I have it. And . . . I’m terrified that *they might be right*.”

“Hmmm . . .,” Gran-Gran said, stringing a bead. “Child, let me tell you a story of someone from the past.”

“It’s not the time for stories, Gran-Gran.”

“This one is about me.”

I shut my mouth. About her? She almost never talked about herself.

She started talking in her rambling, yet engaging way. “My father was a historian on the *Defiant*. He kept the stories of Old Earth, of the times before we traveled into space. Did you know that even then, with computers and libraries and all kinds of reminders, we found it easy to forget where we

came from? Maybe because we had machines to do the remembering for us, we felt we could simply leave it to them.

“Well, that’s a different topic. We were nomads among the stars then. Five ships: the *Defiant* and four smaller vessels that attached to it to travel long distances. Well, and a complement of starfighters. We were a community made up of communities, traveling the stars together. Part mercenary fleet, part trade fleet. Our own people.”

“Grandfather was a historian?” I said. “I thought he was in engineering.”

“He worked in the engine room, helping my mother,” Gran-Gran said. “But his *true* duty was the stories. I remember sitting in the engine room, listening to the hum of the machinery as he talked, his voice echoing against the metal. But that’s not the story. The story is how we came to Detritus.

“You see, we didn’t start the war—but it found us nonetheless. Our little fleet of five ships and thirty fighters had no choice but to fight back. We didn’t know what the Krell were, even then. We hadn’t been part of the big war, and by that point communication with the planets and space stations was difficult and dangerous. Now, your great-grandmother, my mother, was ship’s engines.”

“You mean she worked the engines,” I said, still sorting beads.

“Yes, but in a way, she *was* the engines. She could make them travel the stars, one of the few who could. Without her, or someone like her, the *Defiant* would be stuck at slow speed. The distance between stars is vast, Spensa. And only someone with a specific ability could engage the engines. Something born into us, but something most considered to be very, very dangerous.”

I breathed out, surprised and awed, all at once. “The . . . defect?”

Gran-Gran leaned in. “They feared us, Spensa, though back then they called it the ‘deviation.’ We were a breed apart, the engineers. We were the first people into space, the brave explorers. The ordinary people always resented that we controlled the powers that let them travel the stars.

“But I told you this story was about me. I remember that day, the day we came to Detritus. I was with my father, in the engineering bay. A vast chamber full of pipes and grids that looks bigger in my memory than it probably was. It smelled of grease and of too-hot metal. But there was a window in a little alcove, which I could look out of and see the stars.

“That day, they surrounded us. The enemy, the Krell. I was terrified, in my little heart, because the ship kept shaking from their fire. We were in chaos. The bridge—I heard from someone shouting—had suffered an explosion. I stood in the alcove, watching the red lances of light, and could hear the stars screaming. A little frightened girl by a bubble of glass.

“The captain called down. He had a loud, angry voice. I was terrified to hear the pain, the panic, in someone who was normally so stern. I remember still, that tone as he screamed at my mother, giving orders. And she disagreed with them.”

I sat there, beads forgotten, rapt. Barely breathing. Why, in all the stories Gran-Gran had told me, had she never given me this one before?

“Well, I suppose you could call it a mutiny,” Gran-Gran continued. “We didn’t use that word. But there was a disagreement. The scientists and the engineers against the command staff and the marines. The thing is, none of *them* could make the engines work. Only Mother could do that.

“She chose this place and brought us here. Detritus. But it was too far. Too difficult. She died from the effort, Spensa. Our ships were damaged while landing, the engines broken, but we also lost her. The soul of the engines themselves.

“I remember crying. I remember Father carrying me from the rubble of a ship, and I screamed, reaching back to the smoking hulk—my mother’s tomb. I remember *demanding* to know why Mother had left us. I felt betrayed. I’d been too young to understand the choice she’d made. A warrior’s choice.”

“To die?”

“To *sacrifice*. Spensa. A warrior is nothing if she has nothing to fight for. But if she has everything to fight for . . . well, then that means everything, doesn’t it?”

Gran-Gran strung a bead, then began to tie off the necklace. I felt . . . strangely exhausted. Like this story was a burden I hadn’t been expected to bear.

“This is their ‘defect,’ ” Gran-Gran said. “They call it that because they’re afraid of our ability to hear the stars. Your mother always forbade me from speaking of this to you, because she did not believe it was true. But many in the DDF believe in it—and to them it makes us alien. They lie, saying that my mother brought us here because the Krell wanted us here.

And now that they no longer need us to work the ship engines—because there aren't any—they've hated us even more."

"And Father? I saw him *turn against his flight*."

"Impossible," Gran-Gran said. "The DDF claims our gift makes us monsters, so perhaps they constructed a scenario to prove it. It's convenient for them to tell a story of a man with the defect empathizing with the Krell and turning against his teammates."

I sat back, feeling . . . uncertain. Would Cobb have lied about this? And M-Bot said the record couldn't have been faked. Who did I trust?

"But what if it's true, Gran-Gran?" I asked. "You mentioned the warrior's sacrifice before. Well, what if you know this is in you . . . that it might cause you to betray everyone? Hurt them? If you think you might be a coward, wouldn't the right choice be to . . . just *not fly*?"

Gran-Gran paused, hands frozen. "You've grown," she finally said. "Where is my little girl, who wanted to swing a sword and conquer the world?"

"She's very confused. A bit lost."

"Our gift is a wonderful thing. It lets us hear the stars. It let my mother work the engines. Don't fear it."

I nodded, but I couldn't help feeling betrayed. Shouldn't someone have told me about all this before now?

"Your father was a hero," Gran-Gran said. "Spensa? Do you hear me? You have a gift, not a defect. You can—"

"Hear the stars. Yes, I've felt that." I looked up, but the ceiling of the cavern was in the way.

Honestly, I didn't know what to think anymore. Coming down here had only made me more confused.

"Spensa?" Gran-Gran said.

I shook my head. "Father told me to claim the stars. I worry that they claimed him instead. Thank you for the story." I rose and walked to the ladder.

"Spensa!" Gran-Gran said, this time with a forcefulness that froze me on the ladder.

She looked toward me, milky-white eyes focused right on me, and I felt—somehow—that she could *see* me. When she spoke, the tremble was gone from her voice. Instead there was an authority and command to it, like a battlefield general's.

“If we are ever to leave this planet,” Gran-Gran said, “and escape the Krell, it will *require* the use of our gift. The space between stars is vast, too vast for any ordinary booster to travel. We *must not* cower in the dark because we’re afraid of the spark within us. The answer is not to put out the spark, but to *learn to control it*.”

I didn’t reply, because I didn’t know what my answer to that should be. I climbed down, made my way to the elevators, and returned to the base.

“Verbal confirmations, in ascending order,” said Nose—the flight-leader of Nightmare Flight. “Newbies first.”

“Skyward One, ready,” Jorgen said, then hesitated. He sighed. “Callsign: Jerkface.”

Nose chuckled. “I feel your pain, cadet.”

FM sounded off, then I followed. Skyward Flight—what was left of it—was flying with Nightmare today on their maneuvers.

I hadn’t made any decisions about what to do with the information Gran-Gran had given me. I was still deeply troubled, uncertain. For now though, I had decided to do what Jorgen told me, and keep flying. I could avoid what had happened to my father, right? I could be careful?

I flew through the maneuvers that Nightmare flightleader instructed, letting the familiar motions distract me. It was nice to be back in a Poco-class ship after several weeks of testing other designs. It felt like settling into a familiar easy chair, imprinted with just the right dents from your backside.

We flew in a wide formation—Jorgen paired with a member of Nightmare Flight—down at 10k altitude. We were spotting the ground for wrecks, trails of ships in the dust, and anything else suspicious. It was akin to scouting during a battle, but—if possible—even *more* monotonous.

“Unidentified signature at 53-1-8008!” said one of the men from Nightmare Flight. “We should—”

“Cobb warned us about the 8008 trick,” Jorgen said flatly. “And about the ‘get the green pilot to evacuate his ship’s septic’ trick. And about the ‘prepare for inspection’ joke.”

“Scud,” said one of the other pilots. “Old Cobb really *is* no fun, is he.”

“Because he doesn’t want his cadets getting hazed?” Jorgen said. “We are supposed to be watching for signs of Krell, not engaging in juvenile initiation rituals. I expected better of you men and women.”

I glanced out my cockpit toward FM, who shook her head. *Oh, Jorgen.*

“Jerkface, eh?” said one of the pilots. “I can’t imagine where you’d get a name like that . . .”

“Enough chitchat,” Nose said, cutting off individual channels. “Everyone make for 53.8-702-45000. Home radar shows some turbulence in the debris field above that point.”

A few grumbles met that, which I found curious. I’d imagined full pilots as being . . . well, more dignified. Maybe that was Jorgen’s influence on me.

We flew the indicated heading, and ahead, a large-scale debris fall began to occur. Chunks of metal rained down, some as bright lines of fire and smoke, others—with acclivity rings or still-charged acclivity stone—hovering down more slowly. We carefully approached the edge of the debris fall.

“All right,” Nose said. “We’re supposed to be showing these cadets some maneuvers. While we watch for Krell, let’s do some runs through the debris. If you spot a good acclivity ring, tag it with a radio beacon for salvage. Bog and Tunestone, you’re up first. Local heading eighty-three. Take the two cadets on your tail. Sushi and Nord, you take heading seventeen, and take Jerkface. Maybe he can lecture you on proper procedure. Stars know, you boneheads could use it.”

FM and I followed the full pilots, who did a very cautious—and somewhat unengaging—pass through the debris. We didn’t even use our light-lances. Bog—the man who had made fun of Jorgen earlier—shot a few radio beacons at some larger chunks of debris. “Is your flightleader always like that?” he asked us. “Talking like he’s got his joystick rammed up his backside?”

“Jorgen is a *great* flightleader,” I snapped. “You shouldn’t resent someone just because he expects you to do your best.”

“Yeah,” FM said. “If you’re going to swear to a cause, no matter how fundamentally flawed, then you should try to uphold your office.”

“Scud,” Bog said. “You hearing this, Tunestone?”

“I hear a bunch of yapping puppies on the line,” Tunestone replied. Her voice was high-pitched and dismissive. “They keep drowning out the cadets, unfortunately.”

“You should be careful,” I said, my anger rising. “Next week we’ll be full pilots, and *I’ll* be competing with you for kills. Good luck making ace once that happens.”

Bog chuckled. “A few days from full pilot? My, how grownup you are.” He hit his booster and darted back into the falling debris, Tunestone on his wing. FM and I followed, watching as Bog went in close to a falling chunk of debris, then used his light-lance to pivot around it.

It was a competent pivot, but nothing special. He followed it by pivoting around another piece of junk, which he tagged for salvage. Tunestone followed, though she ended up overshooting her second piece of debris as she pivoted too sharply.

FM and I followed at a modest distance, watching them, until FM said on a direct call, “Spin, I think they’re trying to *show off*.”

“Nah,” I said. “Those were some basic pivots. Surely they don’t think we would be impressed by that . . .”

I trailed off as Bog’s comm line lit up. “That’s called light-lancing, kids. They might be graduating you, but you’ll still have a lot to learn.”

I looked out toward FM, incredulous. I knew—logically—that most cadets focused on dogfighting and destructor play. Cobb said it was part of the DDF’s problem, churning out pilots with a focus on maximizing kills, rather than flight prowess. But even knowing that, I was shocked.

These pilots really expected us to be awed by maneuvers Cobb had taught during our first weeks in flight school?

“Two-fourteen?” I said to FM. “With a double flatline at the end, and a V sweep?”

“Gladly,” she said, and hit her overburn.

The two of us zipped out and then pivoted in opposite directions around a large chunk of debris. I swung myself around a second burning chunk—zipping down beneath it, then flinging myself upward so I launched into the sky, acclivity ring hinging backward. I spun between two larger debris chunks and tagged them both, before pivoting around the higher one to dive back downward.

FM was coming up straight at me. I hit her with a light-lance, then turned and overburned opposite her. The two of us expertly spun each other in the air, conserving momentum. My GravCaps flashed right as I let us out of the maneuver.



After the twist, she rocketed out heading east, and I launched out heading west. We each tagged a piece of debris, then swept around together, rejoining Bog and Tunestone.

Who didn't say anything. I followed them in silence, grinning, until another light on my comm flashed. "You two looking for a flight when you graduate?" Nose asked. "We've got a couple of holes."

"We'll see," FM said. "I might become a scout. Life in this flight seems kind of boring."

"You two been showing off?" Jorgen's voice cut in over a private channel as he flew back with his wingmate.

"Would we do that?" I asked him.

"Spin," he said, "you could be tied to a table with eight broken ribs and a delirious fever, and you'd *still* find a way to make everyone else look bad."

"Hey," I said, grinning at the compliment. "Most people make *themselves* look bad. I just stand to the side and don't get in the way."

Jorgen chuckled. "On my last pass, I saw something flash up above. Might be Krell. Let me see if Nose will let us go check it out."

"There you go again," FM said, "always being a Jerkface and actually remembering our orders."

"Such a terrible example," I said.

He called in to Nose, and started gaining altitude. "Spin and FM, you're with me. We've got clearance to climb to 700k to scope it out. But be careful; we haven't practiced a lot of minimal-atmosphere maneuverability."

Starships could, of course, fly just fine without atmosphere—but it was a different kind of flight. At the same time, I found myself nervous as we climbed higher and higher. This was even higher than I'd gone in M-Bot, and I kept thinking about what had happened when my father had climbed up near the debris field. I still didn't know what had changed up there to make him fight his own team.

Scud. Maybe I should stay down low. It was too late now though, as the general haze of shapes that made up the debris field became increasingly distinct. Getting closer, I could see skylights looming at the lower levels of the debris—and my mind reeled at their scale. We were still a hundred clicks from them, and they looked enormous. How big *were* those?

Timid, I tried to see if I could hear the stars better, up this close. I focused and . . . I thought I heard *faint* sounds coming from up there. But they were

obstructed, as if something was in the way.

*The debris field.* I thought. *It is interfering.* My father had only turned traitor *after* he'd seen a hole in the debris field, an alignment that let him see out into space. And maybe fly all the way through the debris field to get out himself?

"There," FM said, drawing my attention back to our mission. "At my seven. Something big."

The light shifted and I saw a gargantuan shape among the broken bits of debris. Large, boxy, it was somehow familiar . . . "That looks a lot like the old shipyard that I chased Nedd into," I said.

"Yeah," Jorgen said. "And it's in a low orbit. Might crash down in a few days, at that rate. Maybe all of those old shipyards have started running out of power."

"Which means . . .," FM said.

"Hundreds of acclivity rings," Jorgen finished. "If this thing falls, and we can salvage it, it could transform the DDF. I'll call in a report."

Distant light flashed along one side of the enormous shipyard. "Those were destructors," I said. "Something is shooting up there. Don't get too close." I hit the mute, then scrambled for my personal radio. "M-Bot, you seeing this? Any guess what that shipyard is firing at?"

Silence.

Right. M-Bot was gone.

"Please," I whispered into the radio. "I need you."

Silence. I blushed, feeling foolish, then clipped the private radio back into its spot on my seat where it wouldn't rattle around the cockpit.

"That *is* curious, Jorgen," Cobb was saying as I turned off the mute. "Those destructor blasts are probably defense turrets on the shipyard itself—the one that fell earlier had them, though they were out of power by that point. Report this back to Nose, and I'll take it to Flight Command. If that thing drops, we'll want to salvage it before the Krell destroy it."

"Cobb," I said. "It's still firing."

"Yeah," he answered. "So Jorgen said."

"At what though?" I asked.

Up above, black specks resolved into Krell ships, which had likely been scouting the old shipyard's perimeter.

But now they saw us.

We bolted down from the outer atmosphere. “Krell flight on our tail!” Jorgen radioed in. “Repeat. We have a full flight of Krell, perhaps two—twenty ships—chasing us.”

“What have you fool cadets done?” Nose asked.

Jorgen didn’t defend us, as I would have. “Sorry, sir,” he said instead. “Orders?”

“Each of you break off with a pair of experienced pilots. I’ll put you with \_\_\_”

“Sir,” Jorgen interrupted. “I’d rather fly with my flight, if you allow it.”

“Fine, fine,” Nose said, then cursed as the Krell appeared out of the upper atmosphere. “Just stay alive. Nightmare Flight, all ships, go into evasive posturing. Draw their attention and watch for lifebusters. Riptide Flight is only a few clicks away; we should have reinforcements in short order.”

“Spin, you’re point,” Jorgen said, switching to our private flight channel. “You heard our orders. No showboating, no kill chasing. Defensive postures until reinforcements arrive.”

“Gotcha,” I said, and FM did likewise. We fell into a triangle position, and immediately five Krell swarmed in our direction.

I sent us diving to a lower altitude, then pivoted up using a large, mostly stationary chunk of debris. We swooped around, then flew back through the middle of the Krell who were trying to follow. They scattered.

“You call that defensive, Spin?” Jorgen asked.

“Did I shoot at any?”

“You were going to.”

I moved my thumb off the trigger. Spoilsport.

A skylight above dimmed and flickered off as the night cycle began. My canopy had good enough darkvision to lighten the battlefield, but a certain gloom fell on it—darkness punctured by red destructors and the glow of boosters.

The three of us stayed together, swooping and dodging through the mess as Riptide Flight arrived. “Two more flights of reinforcements are nearby,” Jorgen told us. “Waiting in case one of these debris falls contained enemies. We should have good numbers soon. Hold defensive postures for now.”

We confirmed, and FM took point. Unfortunately, right as she was moving into position, a group of Krell came in at us firing. Our defensive maneuvers sent Jorgen and me cutting in one direction and FM in the other.

I gritted my teeth, falling in behind Jorgen as we overburned and swung around a piece of debris, chasing after the two Krell who were now on FM’s tail. Destructors flashed around her as she spun, taking at least two hits to her shield.

“FM, cut right at my mark!” Jorgen said. “Spin, be ready!”

We obeyed, moving as a well-practiced machine. FM swung around a piece of debris while Jorgen and I performed rotating boosts, so we launched sideways to intersect her path. I fell back while Jorgen hit his IMP, then I fired, hitting one Krell and knocking it into a spinning descent. The other cut away from us, fleeing.

I caught Jorgen with my light-lance, and we used our momentum together to turn us after FM, who slowed down and fell in with us. The two of us then took a defensive position around Jorgen, who quickly reignited his shield.

It was over before I had time to think about what we’d just done. Hours upon hours of practice had made it second nature. *Victorious warriors win first and then go to war.* Sun Tzu had said. I was barely starting to understand what that meant.

From what I could judge of the battle, our numbers were roughly even with the Krell, who had been joined by more ships from above. That made me want to go on the offensive, but I stayed in formation, dodging Krell fire and leading groups of them on difficult chases around and through the fighting.

I focused on the battle until, from the corner of my eye, I spotted something. A larger ship just behind a slow-moving chunk of debris. Again,

I hadn't been looking for it specifically, but my brain—trained and practiced by now—picked it out anyway.

"Is that a *lifebuster*?" I said to the others.

"Scud!" Jorgen said. "Flight command, we've got a lifebuster. 53.1-689-12000 falling with an oblong piece of debris that I am marking *right now* with a radio tag."

"Confirmed," a cold voice said on the line. Ironsides herself. She rarely spoke to us directly, though she often listened to the chatter. "Pull back from that position, act as if you haven't seen it."

"Admiral!" I said. "I can hit it, and we're out well beyond where a blast would be dangerous to Alta. Let me bring it down."

"Negative, cadet," Ironsides said. "Pull back."

Flashes in my memory returned to the day Bim had died. My hand felt stiff on the control sphere, but I yanked it forcibly to the side, following Jorgen and FM away from the lifebuster.

It was surprisingly hard. As if my ship itself wanted to disobey.

"Well done, Spin," Cobb said over a private line. "You have the passion. Now you're showing restraint. We'll make a real pilot of you yet."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "But the lifebuster . . ."

"Ironsides knows what she's doing."

We fell back, and other flights were ordered higher into the sky. The battlefield changed shape, as the lifebuster—seemingly ignored—got close to the ground and started toward Alta. I tracked it, nervous, until four aces from Riptide Flight detached and swarmed after it. They would engage it far enough away from the main fight to protect the rest of us if the bomb detonated. If they failed, then the soon-arriving reinforcements would catch the lifebuster.

Our trio of ships picked up some tails, so I had to dodge to avoid heavy fire. The entire pack of Krell followed me, but a second later Jorgen and FM swooped in and drove them off. FM even got a kill, overwhelming a shield without needing the IMP.

"Nice," I said, relaxing from the sudden, intense burst of flying. "And thank you."

Off in the distance, the aces had engaged the lifebuster. Like before, in the flight with Bim, a group of smaller ships had detached from the bomber and were protecting it. "Cobb," I said, hitting the comm. "Have you learned anything about those ships that travel with the lifebuster?"

“Not much,” Cobb said. “It’s newer behavior, but they’ve been appearing with all bombers recently. The aces will deal with them. Keep your attention on your flight, Spin.”

“Yes, sir.”

I still couldn’t help watching the fight for the lifebuster. If it blew, we’d have to be ready to overburn away before its sequence of explosions completed. So I was relieved when eventually, the lifebuster and its escort pulled up into the sky, retreating. The aces gave token chase, but eventually let the bomb escape back up where it had come from. I smiled.

“Mayday!” a voice called on the general line. “This is Bog. Shields down. Wingmate down. Please. Someone!”

“55.5-699-4000!” FM said, and I looked toward the coordinates, spotting a beleaguered Poco trailing smoke and fleeing outward, away from the main battlefield. Four Krell followed. The best way to get yourself killed was to let them isolate you, but Bog clearly didn’t have a choice.

“Skyward Flight here, Bog,” Jorgen said, taking point. “We have you. Hold on and try to bear left.”

We stormed after him and fired at will on Jorgen’s order. Our hailstorm of destructor fire didn’t bring down any enemy ships, but it made most of them scatter. Three went left—which would cut Bog off. Jorgen turned after those, and FM followed him.

“There’s still one on his tail,” I said. “I’ll take it.”

“All right,” Jorgen said with a moment’s pause. He obviously hated splitting the flight.

I fell in after the ship. Straight ahead, Bog was going through increasingly crazy maneuvers—reckless ones—to avoid being hit.

“Shoot it!” he screamed. “Please shoot it. Just shoot it!”

Desperation, frantic worry—things I hadn’t expected of a full pilot. Of course, he looked young. Though it should have occurred to me earlier, I realized he’d probably graduated in one of the classes right before mine. Six months, maybe a year, as a pilot—but still an eighteen-year-old boy.

I picked up two tails that concentrated fire on me. Scud. Bog had led our chase so far out, it was going to be hard to pick up support. I didn’t dare IMP, not with destructors flashing around me—but that Krell ahead of me still had a shield up.

I gritted my teeth, then hit my overburn. G-forces pressed me back in my seat, and I got closer to the Krell, sticking to its tail, barely able to dodge.

I'd hit Mag-3, and at this speed, flight maneuvers were going to be difficult to control.

*Just a second longer . . .*

I got in close and speared the Krell ship with my light-lance. Then I turned, pulling the Krell ship out of line with Bog.

The cockpit trembled around me as my captive Krell cut in the other direction, fighting me, sending us both into a frantic out-of-control spin.

My tails turned and concentrated fire on me. They didn't care if they hit the ship I had lanced; Krell never cared about that.

A storm of fire swallowed me, hitting my shield and drilling it down. The Krell ship I'd speared exploded under fire from its allies, and I was forced to pull into a sharp climb on full overburn to try to get away.

That was a risky move. My GravCaps cut out, and the g-force hit like a kick to the face. It pulled me downward, forced the blood into my feet. My flight suit inflated, pushing against my skin, and I did my breathing exercises as trained.

My vision still blackened at the edges.

Flashing lights on my console.

My shield was down.

I cut my acclivity ring, spun on my axis, then overburned *right back downward*. The GravCaps managed to absorb some of the whiplash, but a human body simply wasn't meant to handle that kind of reversal. I felt sick, and almost threw up as I passed through the middle of the Krell.

My hands were trembling on the controls, my vision growing red this time. Most of the Krell didn't respond in time, but one of them—one ship—managed to spin on its own axis as I had.

It focused on me, then fired.

A flash on my wing; an explosion.

I'd been hit.

Beeps screamed at me from my console. Lights flashed. My control sphere suddenly didn't seem to do anything, going slack as I tried to maneuver.

The cockpit rocked, and the world rotated as my ship started spiraling out of control.

"Spin!" I somehow heard Jorgen's shout over the chaos of the beeping.

"Eject, Spin! You're going down!"

*Eject.*

You weren't supposed to be able to think during moments like these. It was all supposed to happen in a flash. And yet, that second seemed frozen to me.

My hand, hovering as it reached for the eject lever between my legs.

The world a spinning blur. My wing, gone. My ship on fire, my acclivity ring unresponsive.

A moment frozen between life and death.

And Hurl, in the back of my head. Brave to the end. Not cowards. *A pact.*

I would not eject. I could steer this ship down! I was *NO COWARD!* I was not afraid to die.

*And what will it do to them.* something else within me asked, *if you do?* What would it do to my flight to lose me? What would it do to Cobb, to my mother?

Screaming, I grabbed the eject lever and yanked hard. My canopy exploded off, and my seat blasted out into the sky.

I woke to silence.

And . . . wind, brushing against my face. My seat lay on the dusty ground and I faced the sky. The parachute flapped behind me; I could hear the wind playing with it.

I had blacked out.

I lay there, staring upward. Red streaks in the distance. Explosions. Blossoms of orange light. Just faint pops, from this far down.

I shifted to the side. What was left of my Poco burned in the near distance, destroyed.

My future, my life, burned away with it. I lay there until the battle ended, the Krell retreating. Jorgen did a flyby to check if I was all right, and I waved to him to allay his worry.

By the time a rescue transport came for me—lowering silently on its acclivity ring—I had unbuckled. My radio and my canteen had survived the ejection attached to my seat; I had used one to call in and drank from the other. A medic had me sit on a seat in the transport, then inspected me while a member of the Survey Corps walked out and looked over the wreckage of my Poco.

The salvage woman eventually walked back, holding a clipboard.

“Well?” I asked softly.



“In-seat GravCaps kept you from smashing your own spine,” the medic said. “You seem to have only minimal whiplash, unless there’s a pain you’re not telling me about.”

“I didn’t mean me.” I looked at the salvage woman, then over at my Poco.

“The acclivity ring is destroyed,” she said. “Not much to salvage.”

That was what I’d been afraid of. I strapped into the transport’s seat, then looked out the window as it took off. I watched the burning light of my Poco’s fire fade, then vanish.

At last we landed at Alta, and I climbed out of the vehicle, stiff, body aching. I limped across the tarmac. Somehow I knew—before I even saw her face—that one of the figures standing in the darkness beside the landing site would be Admiral Ironsides.

*Of course* she had come. She finally had a real excuse to kick me out. And could I blame her, now that I knew what I did?

I stopped in front of her and saluted. She, remarkably, saluted me back. Then she unpinned my cadet’s pin from my uniform.

I didn’t cry. Honestly, I was too tired, and my head hurt too much.

Ironsides turned the pin over in her fingers.

“Sir?” I said.

She handed my pin back. “Cadet Spensa Nightshade, you are dismissed from flight school. By tradition, as a cadet who was shot down soon before graduation, you’ll be added to the list of possible pilots to call up should we have extra ships.”

Those “possible pilots” could be summoned by the admiral’s order only. It would never happen to me.

“You can keep your pin,” Ironsides added. “Wear it with pride, but return your other gear to the quartermaster by twelve hundred tomorrow.” Then without another word, she turned and left.

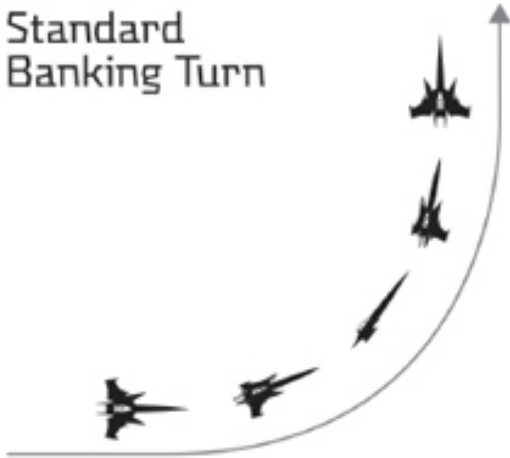
I held a second salute until she was out of sight, pin gripped in the fingers of my other hand. It was over. I was done.

Skyward Flight would graduate only two members after all.

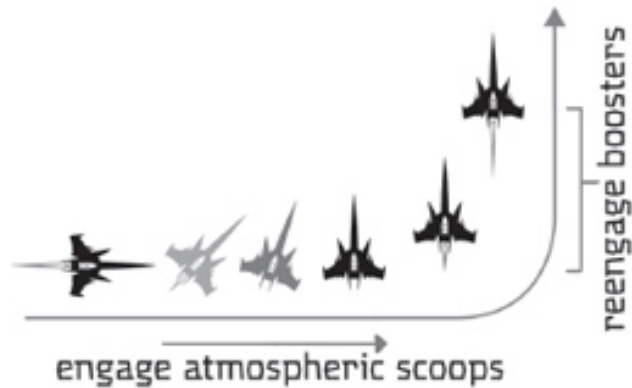
# Turning Methods

## Turns

Standard Banking Turn



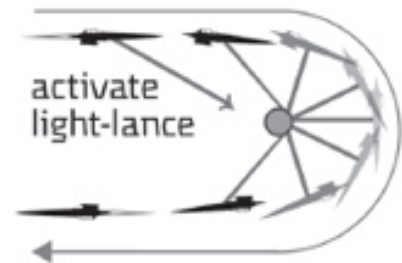
Minimal-Atmosphere (or Scoop-Aided) Turn



Minimal-Atmosphere (or Scoop-Aided) Reversal

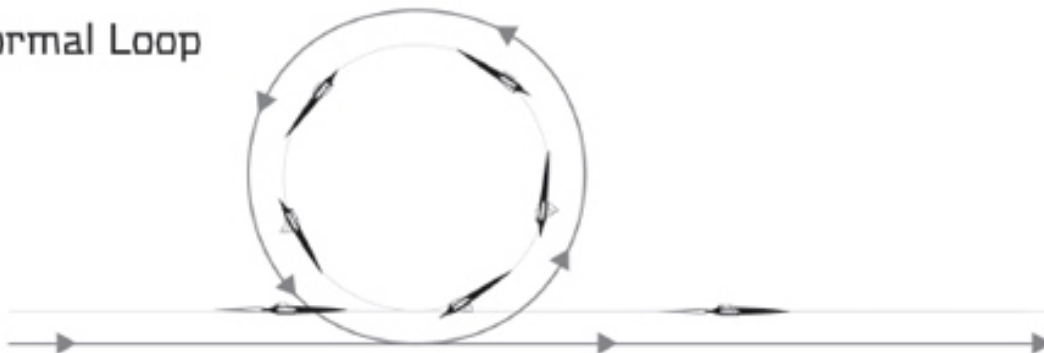


Light-Lance-Assisted Turn



## Loops

Normal Loop



Ahlstrom Loop





## PART FIVE

## INTERLUDE

*That is one problem handled.* thought Judy “Ironsides” Ivans as she walked away from the launchpad. Rikolfr, her aide-de-camp, hurried along beside her, holding his ever-present clipboard full of things Judy needed to do.

At the door to her command building, she looked over her shoulder. Chaser’s daughter—the defect—held her salute, then pressed her cadet’s pin against her chest.

Judy felt a small spike of guilt, then pushed her way into Flight Command. *I’ve fought that fight.* she thought, *and bear the battle scars.* The last time she’d ignored the defect, she’d been forced to watch a friend go crazy and kill his flightmates.

This was a good outcome. The girl would get some honor, as she was due for her passion. And Judy now had some data about the brains of people with the defect. She had to give credit to Cobb’s scheme for that—if he hadn’t forced her to let the child into the DDF, Judy would never have had that opportunity.

Now, fortunately, she had a solid, traditional reason for never putting Chaser’s daughter in a fighter again. And she could watch each new cadet for signs of the defect. This was actually an ideal outcome in every possible way.

If only other problems could be dealt with so easily. Judy approached a small conference room, then stopped, looking at Rikolfr. “Are they here?”

“NAL Weight is in attendance,” Rikolfr said. “As are NALs Mendez and Ukrit.”

That was *three* National Assembly Leaders. Normally, they sent underlings to these post-battle briefings, but Judy had been expecting a

larger confrontation for some time. She would need something to give them. A plan. “Have the radio technicians confirmed the existence of that shipyard the scouts spotted tonight?”

Rikolfr handed her a sheet of paper. “It’s too far for traditional scanners, but we’ve been able to send up a science ship to investigate, from a safe distance. The shipyard is there, and the scientists are optimistic. If it’s like the other one—and if we can protect it from the Krell—we could recover hundreds of acclivity rings.”

She nodded, reading the statistics.

“The orbit is decaying rapidly, sir,” Rikolfr noted. “The old shipyard seems to be suffering a severe power failure. Scientists guess the proximity guns will stop firing in a couple of days, right about the time it drops into the atmosphere. The Krell will undoubtedly try to get in and destroy it.”

“Then we’ll have to prevent that,” Judy said. “Anything else I need to know?”

“This many assembly leaders? It smells of an ambush, sir. Be prepared.”

She nodded, put on her political face, and strode into the small room, Rikolfr following. A collection of the most powerful people in the lower caverns waited for her, each of them wearing a military dress uniform and pins indicating their merits.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said. “I’m pleased to see you taking a direct interest in—”

“Dispense with the platitudes, Ironsides,” said Algernon Weight—young Jorgen’s father. The stiff, greying man sat at the head of the conference table, opposite Judy. “You lost more ships tonight.”

“We have successfully scared away a lifebuster, scoring a great victory over—”

“You’re driving the DDF into the ground,” Weight said.

“During your tenure,” Ukrit added, “our reserve of ships has fallen to historic lows. I hear that broken fighters are just sitting in hangars, lacking parts for repair.”

“Your pilot casualty rates are terrible,” Valda Mendez said. She was a petite woman with tan skin. Ironsides had flown with her, once upon a time. “We want to know what your plan is for ending the DDF’s spiral of failure.”

*It would help.* Judy thought, *if you would stop taking our best pilots away.* Valda herself seemed completely unashamed of stealing her son from the DDF to keep him out of battle.

But Judy couldn't say that. She couldn't explain how desperate the DDF was, now that the better admirals and commanders were dead. She couldn't explain how she'd foreseen this years ago, and no amount of scraping and scrambling had been able to prevent the descent. She couldn't explain that her people were overworked, and that their morale was crumbling beneath so many losses and pilot casualties.

She couldn't say any of that because, although it was true, it was no excuse. Her job was to offer a solution. A miracle.

She held up one of the sheets Rikolfr had given her. "Lanchester's Law," she said. "Do you know it?"

"Equal armies of soldiers with equal skill will impose equivalent casualties upon each other," Weight said. "But the larger the imbalance in troops, the more disproportionate the casualties. Essentially, the more you outnumber your enemy, the less damage you can expect each of their soldiers to impose."

"The bigger your numerical odds," Valda said, "the fewer people you lose."

Judy handed the page to the group. "This," she said, "is a scout report—with initial scientific analysis—of a large piece of salvage that should crash down in two days. The Krell never field more than a hundred ships at once—but if we can salvage this shipyard, we can top that."

"Hundreds of potential acclivity rings," Valda said, reading the report. "You think you can do it? Salvage this?"

"I think we have no other choice," Judy said. "Until we can field more ships than the Krell, we'll be fighting a losing battle. If we can stop them from destroying that shipyard as it falls, it might be just what we need."

"The report says it will crash down on graduation day," Ukrit said with a grunt. "Looks like it will be a short ceremony."

"Let's be clear," Weight said. "Ivans, what are you proposing?"

"We *must* capture this piece of salvage," Judy said. "We have to be ready to throw *everything* we have at protecting it. As soon as its orbit starts to degrade, and its proximity guns run out of power, we have to destroy every Krell ship that tries to get close to it."

"Bold," Ukrit said.

"They won't let that salvage go easily," Rikolfr said, looking toward the others. "If they don't retreat, we won't be able to either. We could end up

engaged in a battle where our every ship is committed. If we lose, it will leave us devastated.”

“It will be a second Battle of Alta,” Weight said softly. “All or nothing.”

“I *fought* in the Battle of Alta,” Ironsides said. “And I know the risks involved in such an engagement. But frankly, we’re out of options. Either we try this, or we waste away. Can I count on your support for this proposal?”

One at a time, the assembly leaders nodded. They knew as well as she did. The time to make a stand was when you were still strong enough to possibly win.

Just like that, they were committed.

*Stars help us all.* Judy thought.



I attended the graduation.

I stood in the audience with everyone else, on the parade ground beside the statue park inside Alta Base.

On a wooden stage, Ironsides pinned each of the eight graduates with the symbol of their success. I hung near the back of the small crowd, among a few other people wearing cadet's pins. People who had washed out, like me. Though we couldn't fly, our pins would get us access to the elevators whenever we wanted, and we were invited to functions like this. I'd gotten a form letter from Ironsides.

My emotions were complicated as I watched Jorgen and FM, in turn, accept their pins. I was certainly proud of them. And deeply envious, while somewhat ashamedly relieved at the same time. I didn't know if I could be trusted to be up on that stand. This solved the problem. I didn't have to decide.

Deep in my heart though, my world was crumbling. To never fly again? Could I *live* knowing that?

Jorgen and FM saluted with gloved hands while wearing new, crisp white uniforms. I clapped with the rest of the crowd for the eight graduates, but I couldn't help thinking that we'd lost at *least* three times that many ships in the last four months. Not so long ago, a good pilot in the DDF could fly for five years, rack up a couple dozen kills, and retire to fly cargo. But casualties were getting worse and worse, and fewer and fewer pilots lasted five years.

The Krell were winning. Slowly but surely.

Ironsides stepped up to speak. "Normally, you'd expect a bad speech from me right now. It's practically tradition. But we have an operation

today of some importance, so I'm going to leave it at a few words. These behind me represent our best. They are our pride, the symbol of our Defiance. We will not hide. We will not back down. We will reclaim our homeland in the stars, and it starts today."

More applause, though I gathered—from conversations around me—that such a brief speech was odd. As some refreshments were set up on tables to our right, the admiral and her command staff walked away without mingling. More strangely, the newly commissioned pilots followed her.

I craned my neck, and saw a flight of fighters shoot up into the air from a nearby launchpad. Was there an incursion happening? Did they really need all the graduates? After spending the last few days down with my mother and Gran-Gran, I had been looking forward to seeing Jorgen and FM again.

Booms sounded in the distance as the fighters got a safe distance from the base, then hit overburn and accelerated past the sound barrier. A nearby man noted that the important assembly leaders—including those who had children in the graduating class—weren't in attendance at the graduation. Something *was* happening.

I took a step toward the launchpads, then shoved my hands in my jumpsuit pockets. I turned to go, but stopped. Cobb was standing there, holding a cane with a golden top. That was odd; I didn't think I'd ever seen him carry one of those.

Even in his sharp white uniform, he seemed as old as a weathered boulder lying in the dust. I saluted him. I hadn't been able to face him, face any of them, since being shot down.

He didn't salute back. He limped over to me, then looked me up and down. "We going to fight this?"

"What is there to fight?" I asked, still holding the salute.

"Put your hand down, girl. You were close enough to graduation. I can challenge that you should at least be given a full pin like Arturo was."

"I'd never get to fly, so what does it matter?"

"A full pilot's pin is worth a lot in Igneous."

"This was never about a pin," I said. I looked over his shoulder at another flight launching into the air. "What's happening?"

"That shipyard you spotted? Should be falling out of orbit today. The admiral is determined to get it, and if she wins this fight there could be hundreds of new spots open for pilots—more than we can fill."

I finally lowered my hand from the salute, watching this second flight go supersonic. A sequence of distant cracks sounded in the air, rattling dishware on the refreshments table.

“Spin?” Cobb said. “I didn’t think you were one to—”

“I’ve heard the stars, Cobb.”

He immediately fell silent.

“I saw the eyes,” I continued. “A thousand pinpricks of white light. More. Millions of them. As one, they turned to watch me. And they *saw me*.”

Cobb went white as a sheet. His hand trembled on his cane. We stood practically alone on the packed earth of the parade ground.

“I have the defect,” I whispered. “Like my father.”

“I . . . see.”

“Was he ever erratic before that day?” I asked. “Did he show any signs before he suddenly turned and attacked you?”

Cobb shook his head. “He saw things, heard things, but nothing dangerous. Judy—Ironsides—always told him that even if the defect was real, he could overcome it. She fought for him, defended him. Stuck her neck out, until . . .”

A third flight launched. They were *really* committed to getting that shipyard.

I looked up toward the twisting shadows of the debris field. I sighed, then unhooked the radio from my belt and handed it to Cobb.

He hesitated, then took it. I could see from his worried eyes, his pale face, the truth. Knowing I’d seen those eyes . . . it changed his mind. He didn’t want me to fly. I was too dangerous.

“I’m sorry, kid,” he said.

“It’s better this way,” I said. “We don’t have to worry about what I might or might not do.”

I forced out a smile, then turned from him to walk toward the refreshments. Inside, I was breaking.

The person I’d been four months ago would never have accepted some phantom “defect” as an excuse to keep me from flying. But I wasn’t that person anymore. I was someone else, someone who couldn’t look at courage and cowardice in the simple terms that she once had.

I’d ejected. I’d nearly crumpled under the weight of losing my friends. Even ignoring all of this craziness about hearing the stars, I wasn’t certain I

*deserved* to fly.

It was better if I just let it all go. I lowered my head and turned away from the refreshment tables, not wanting to be around people.

A hand grabbed me by the arm. “And where do you think *you’re* going?”

I looked up, ready to punch . . . Nedd?

He wore a goofy grin. “I missed the actual ceremony, didn’t I. I thought for sure I’d be safe coming a few minutes late—Ironsides always talks for like ten hours. Where’s Jerkface? FM? I need to congratulate them.”

“They’re flying a mission.”

“Today?” Nedd said. “That’s dumb. I’m supposed to wrangle them into joining us for a real party.” He seemed genuinely upset as, behind us, a *fourth* flight of ships rose into the air. Nedd sighed, then grabbed me by the arm again. “Well, at least I can wrangle you.”

“Nedd, I didn’t make it. I ejected. I—”

“I know. That just means you won’t take demerits for leaving the base for the party.” He tugged me after him. “Come on. The others are there already. Arturo’s family has radio access. We can listen to the battle and cheer them on.”

I sighed, but that last part was intriguing. I let him tow me off after him as a *fifth* flight of ships rose into the air and flew the same direction as the others.

“Cobb said the admiral was going to try to salvage the shipyard,” I explained as Arturo set a large, boxy radio on our table at the restaurant—rattling the drinks. “Nedd and I saw at least five flights take off. They’re serious about this.”

The others gathered around. It was good to see them again, and strangely refreshing not to see condemnation in their eyes. Kimmalyn, Nedd, Arturo. The rest of the dim restaurant was empty. Just us and a couple of younger teenagers not wearing flight pins—probably the children of field or orchard workers.

“They called in everyone,” Arturo said, running a cord from the radio to the wall. “Even the reserves from the lower caverns. This is going to be *some* fight.”

“Yeah,” I said. I looked down at my drink and fries, neither of which I’d touched.

“Hey,” Kimmalyn said, poking me in the side. “You sulking?”

I shrugged.

“Good,” she said. “This is a *day* for sulking!”

“Graduation day,” Nedd said, raising his cup. “For the washout club!”

“Hurrah!” Kimmalyn said, raising hers.

“You’re both idiots,” Arturo said, fiddling with the dials on the radio. “I didn’t wash out. I graduated early.”

“Yeah?” Nedd asked. “And did they call *you* in to fly this battle, mister full pilot sir?”

Arturo blushed. I noticed for the first time that he wasn’t wearing his pilot’s pin. Most everyone wore theirs every day—in uniform or not.

The radio started belting out chatter, and Arturo quickly turned down the volume, then tuned it further until he landed on a channel with a firm female voice. “There we go,” he said. “The Assembly monitoring channel. This should be a straight-up explanation of the battle for government leaders, not the sanitized version piped down to the people listening in Igneous.”

We settled in as the woman on the radio spoke. “With the launch of Ivy Flight, we have eleven flights in the air and five scouting trios. The Saints and the North Star watch us this day, as the glorious fighters of the Defiant League engage.”

Nedd whistled. “Eleven? Do we have that many flights?”

“Obviously,” Arturo said. “Seriously, Nedd. Do you ever think before you speak?”

“Nope!” He took a slurp of his green fizzy drink.

“A man who speaks his mind,” Kimmalyn said solemnly, “is a man with a mind to speak of.”

“We normally maintain twelve flights,” Arturo said. “Four on duty at any given moment, usually with one or two in the air patrolling. Four on immediate call. Four more on deep reserve duty, protected in the lower caverns. In the past, we tried to keep them at ten ships each—but these days we’re down to eleven flights, and most of them are only seven or so fighters strong.”

“Eighty-seven brave pilots,” the announcer continued, “are making their way to engage the Krell to rescue the salvage. Victory will bring our league unprecedented glory and spoils!”

She had a voice like the announcers I'd listened to down below. Strong, but almost monotone—with an air of reading pages as they were put in front of her.

"This is too sterile," I said. "Can we hear the real chatter? Tune to the pilot bands?"

Arturo looked at the others. Nedd shrugged, but Kimmalyn nodded. So Arturo turned the volume down further. "We're not supposed to listen to these," he said softly. "But what will they do? Kick us out of the DDF?"

He tuned a few notches until he hit the general flightleader channel. The radios in Igneous wouldn't be able to decrypt what they were saying, but obviously Arturo's family was important enough to have a radio with an unscrambler.

"They're coming in," an unfamiliar voice said. "Scud. There's a *lot* of them."

"Get us counts," Ironsides said. "How many flights? How many ships?"

"Scouts reporting in." I recognized that voice—it was Cloak. She was one of the scouts who had fought alongside us before. "We'll get you numbers, Admiral."

"All active flights," Ironsides said, "stay on the defensive until we get enemy numbers. Flight Command out."

I pulled my seat closer, listening to the chatter—trying to imagine the fight. A different scout described the falling shipyard. An enormous, ancient construct of steel, with gaping holes and twisting corridors.

Scout numbers came back. The first wave of Krell had been fifty strong, but another fifty followed. The enemy knew how important this fight was. They'd sent every ship; they were as committed as we were.

"A hundred ships," Nedd said softly. "What a fight that must be . . ." He looked haunted; perhaps he was remembering our chase through the bowels of the shipyard.

"That's it, they're fully committed," Ironsides said. "Riptide Flight, Valkyrie Flight, Tungsten Flight, and Nightmare Flight, I want you to provide covering fire. Inner flights, keep the Krell away from that shipyard. Don't let them detonate a bomb on it!"

A series of affirmatives came from the flightleaders. I closed my eyes, imagining the swarm of ships, the destructor blasts in the air. It was a relatively open battlefield, with little debris except for the one enormous shipyard.

My fingers began going through motions, as if I were controlling a ship. I could feel it. The rattling of my cockpit, the rushing of the air, the flare of the booster . . .

Saints and stars. I was going to miss it *so much*.

“That’s a bomber,” one of the flightleaders said. “I have confirmation from three ships.”

“Scout confirmation,” Cloak said. “We see it too. Flight Command, a bomber is heading toward the shipyard. It’s carrying a lifebuster.”

“Drive it away!” Ironsides said. “Protecting the salvage is our most important objective.”

“Yes, sir,” a flightleader said. “Confirm. We push back, even if it means driving the bomber toward Alta?”

Silence on the line.

“It would take two or more hours of flight at bomber speeds to get within range of Alta,” Ironsides said. “We’ll have time to stop it before then. Orders stand.”

“Two hours?” Nedd said. “They’re farther out than I thought.”

“Well, bombers are about half as fast as a Poco,” Arturo said. “So the shipyard is coming down around an hour out from us—which is about how long it took our forces to get out there. It adds up, if you think long enough to calculate it.”

“Why would I have to do that?” Nedd said. “When you’ll do the hard work for me?”

“Does anyone else feel . . . anxious?” Kimmalyn asked.

“They said a lifebuster was out there, potentially coming our way,” Arturo said. “So yeah.”

“Not about that,” Kimmalyn said, looking at me. “About just sitting here, listening.”

“We should be up there,” I whispered. “This is it. A battle like the Battle of Alta. They need everyone . . . and here we are. Listening. Sipping sodas.”

“They’ve scrambled every battle-worthy ship,” Arturo said. “If we were back at the DDF, we’d only be sitting around *there* and listening.”

“We’ve got it on the run,” one of the flightleaders said. “I confirm, bomber has veered away from the salvage target. But Admiral, it *is* trying to break toward Alta.”

“This bomber is fast,” Cloak said. “Faster than most.”

“Scout contingents,” Ironsides said, “move to intercept. Everyone else, don’t get distracted. Stay on that shipyard! This could be a decoy.”

“I’m down to three ships,” a flightleader said. “Requesting support. They’re swarming us, Flight Command. Scud, it—”

Silence.

“Valkyrie flightleader is down,” someone else said. “I’m going to absorb their remaining ships. Flight Command, we’re taking a beating out here.”

“All ships,” Ironsides said, “full offensive. Drive them back. Don’t let them reach the shipyard.”

“Yes, sir,” a chorus of flightleaders said.

The battle continued for some time, and we listened, tense. Not just because of the pilots dying trying to claim the shipyard, but because each moment of the battle, that bomber was drawing closer and closer to Alta.

“Scout ships,” Ironsides eventually said. “Do you have an update on that lifebuster?”

“We’re still on it, sir!” Cloak said. “But the bomber is well defended. Ten ships.”

“Understood,” Ironsides said.

“Sir!” Cloak said. “It *is* going faster than ordinary bomber speed. And it just sped up. If we aren’t careful, it will get within blast range of Alta.”

“Engage them,” Ironsides said.

“With only scouts?”

“Yes,” Ironsides said.

I felt so *powerless*. As a child, listening to war stories, my head had been full of drama and excitement—glory and kills. But today, I could hear the strain in the voices as flightleaders watched their friends die. I heard explosions over the channel, and winced at each one.

Jorgen and FM were out there somewhere. I should be helping. Protecting.

I closed my eyes. Without really intending to, I performed Gran-Gran’s exercise, imagining myself soaring among the stars. Listening for them. Reaching . . .

A dozen spots of white light appeared inside my eyelids. Then hundreds. I felt the attention of something vast, something terrible, shift toward me.

I gasped and opened my eyes. The pinpricks of light vanished, but my heart thundered in my ears, and all I could think of was that inescapable sensation of *things* seeing me. Unnatural things. Hateful things.



When I finally managed to put my attention back on the battle, Cloak was reporting a full-on conflict with the lifebuster's guard ships. Arturo turned a few frequencies and found their flight chatter—twelve scouts had been unified in a single flight for this battle.

Arturo switched back and forth between the scout channel and the flightleader channel. Both battles raged, but finally—at long last—some welcome news came in.

“Bomber destroyed!” Cloak said. “The lifebuster bomb is in free fall, heading toward the ground. All scouts, pull out! Over-burn! Now!” Her channel wavered and fuzzed.

We waited, anxious. And I thought I could hear the sequence of three explosions—in fact, I was sure of it—echoing in the near distance. Scud. That had been *close* to Alta.

“Cloak?” Ironsides asked. “Nice work.”

“She’s dead,” a soft voice said on the line. That was FM. “This is callsign: FM. Cloak died in the blast. There are . . . sir, there are three of us left in the scout flight. The others died in the fighting.”

“Confirmed,” Ironsides said. “Stars accept their souls.”

“Should we . . . return to the other battle?” FM asked.

“Yes.”

“All right.” She sounded rattled.

I looked toward the others, frustrated. Surely there was *something* we could do. “Arturo,” I said, “doesn’t your family have some private ships?”

“Three fighters,” he said. “Down in the deep caverns. But as a rule, they don’t get involved in DDF battles.”

“Even a desperate one like this?” Kimmalyn asked.

Arturo hesitated, then spoke more softly. “*Especially* a battle like this. Their job is to protect my family if we have to evacuate. The worse things get, the *less* likely my parents would be to commit their ships.”

“And if we didn’t ask them?” Nedd said. “What if we just took the ships?”

He and Arturo exchanged looks, then grinned. Both looked at me, and my heart trembled with excitement. To fly again. In a battle like this, like the Battle of Alta.

The battle where . . . where my father had broken. It was too dangerous for me to be up there. What if I did what he did, and turned on my friends?

“Take Kimmalyn,” I found myself saying.

“You sure?” Arturo asked.

“I’m not!” Kimmalyn said. She grabbed my hands. “Spin, you’re better than I am. I’ll just fail again.”

“My family’s ships are in a secure cavern,” Arturo said. “It will take us at least fifteen minutes to get them up the private ship elevator. That’s not counting the part where we have to somehow sneak in and *steal* them.”

I squeezed Kimmalyn’s hands. “Quirk,” I told her, “you’re the best shot I’ve ever seen, the best I’ve ever *heard* of. They need you. FM and Jorgen need you.”

“But you—”

“I can’t fly, Quirk,” I said. “There’s a medical reason I can’t explain right now. So you’ve got to go.” I squeezed her hands tighter.

“I failed Hurl,” she said softly. “I’ll fail the others.”

“No. The only way you fail, Kimmalyn, is if you’re not there. *Be there.*”

Her eyes watered, then she grabbed me in a hug. Arturo and Nedd rushed out of the room, and Kimmalyn ran out after them.

I sank down into my seat and leaned against the table, crossing my arms and laying my head down.

The radio chatter continued, including a new voice. “Flight Command,” the woman’s ragged voice said. “This is antiaircraft gun outpost forty-seven. We’re down, sir.”

“Down?” Ironsides said. “What happened?”

“That blast from the lifebuster hit us,” the woman said. “Stars. I’m just crawling out of the mess now. I tore this radio off my CO’s corpse. It looks like . . . AA guns forty-six and forty-eight are gone too. That bomb hit close. You’ve got a hole in your defenses, sir. Scud, scud, *scud*. I need medical transports!”

“Understood, outpost forty-seven. Sending—”

“Sir?” the gunner’s voice said again. “Tell me you have that on radar.”

“What?”

I felt a chill.

“Debris fall,” the gunner said. “North of here. Hold on a minute, I’ve got some binoculars . . .”

I waited, tense, imagining a single gunner climbing over the wreckage of her destroyed gun emplacement.

“I have visual on multiple Krell ships,” the gunner said. “A second group, coming down far away from the battle for the shipyard. Sir, they’re coming

in right where our defenses are out. Confirm! Did you hear me!”

“We heard,” Ironsides said.

“Sir, they’re heading right for Alta. Scramble the reserves!”

There were no reserves. The chill inside me became ice. Ironsides had committed everything we had to the battle for the shipyard. And now, a second group of Krell had appeared from the sky—right where the bomb had knocked out our defenses.

It was a trick.

The Krell wanted this. They wanted to draw our fighters into a battle far from Alta. They wanted to convince us that all of the Krell ships were engaged, so that we threw everything we had at them. Then they dropped a lifebuster on our AA guns to open the path.

That way, they could bring in more ships and another bomb.

Boom.

No more Defiants.

“Riptide Flight,” Admiral Ironsides said. “I want you back at Alta immediately! Full speed!”

“Sir?” the flightleader said. “We can disengage, but we’re a good thirty minutes out, even at Mag-10.”

“Hurry!” she said. “Get back here.”

*Too slow.* I thought. Alta was doomed. There weren’t any ships. There weren’t any pilots.

Except one.

## 49

Still, I hesitated.

I'd decided not to go with Nedd and the others because it was too dangerous. What about the defect?

In that moment, Hurl's voice returned to me. *A pact.* she seemed to whisper. *Brave until the end. No backing down, Spin.*

No backing down. Alta was in danger, and I was just going to sit here? Because I was afraid of what I *might* do?

No. Because I didn't know, deep down, if I was a coward or not. Because I worried not only about the defect, but about whether I was worthy of flying. In that moment, the truth struck me hard. Like the admiral, I was using the defect as an *excuse* to avoid facing the real issue.

To avoid discovering for myself who I was.

I stood up and dashed out of the restaurant. Forget the defect—they were going to drop a lifebuster to destroy both *Alta* and *Igneous*. It didn't matter if I was dangerous. The Krell were far, far more so.

I raced down the street toward the base, a vague plan of going to M-Bot coalescing in my mind. But that would take too long—besides, he'd shut himself down. I imagined bursting into the cavern only to be confronted by a dead, empty piece of metal that wouldn't turn on.

I stopped in the street, puffing, sweating, and looked out toward the hills—then toward Alta Base.

There *was* one other ship.

I dashed up the street and through the gates, flashing my cadet's pin to gain admittance. I turned right, toward the launchpads, and scrambled up to the ground crew, who were launching medical transports to go to the AA

guns. The bulky, slow ships rose smoothly into the air on large acclivity rings.

I spotted Dorgo, the ground crewman who often worked my ship, and ran up to him.

“Skyward Ten?” Dorgo said. “What are you—”

“The broken ship, Dorgo,” I said, puffing. “Skyward Five. Arturo’s ship. Will it fly?”

“We’re supposed to break it down for parts,” Dorgo said, taken aback. “We got a start on fixing it up, but shields are out and we never got replacements. Steering is compromised as well. It’s not battle-worthy.”

“Will it *fly*?”

Several members of the ground crew glanced at each other.

“Technically,” Dorgo said, “yes.”

“Prep it for me!” I said.

“Did the admiral approve this?”

I glanced at the side of the launchpad, where a radio like Arturo’s was belting out the flightleader channel. They’d been listening.

“There’s a second group of Krell heading straight for Alta,” I said, pointing. “And there are no reserves. Do you want to go talk to the woman who hates me for irrational reasons, or do you want to just get me into the scudding air?”

Nobody spoke.

“Prep Skyward Five!” Dorgo finally shouted. “Go, go!”

Two ground crewmen ran off, and I dashed into the locker room, emerging a minute later—after the fastest change ever—in a flight suit. Dorgo led me to a Poco that the crew was pulling out onto the launchpad with a ship tow.

Dorgo grabbed a ladder. “Tony, that’ll do! Unhook!”

He slammed the ladder into place even as the ship stopped.

I scrambled up and into the open cockpit, trying not to look at the black destructor scars on the left side of the ship. Scud, it was in bad shape.

“Listen, Spin,” Dorgo said, following me up. “You don’t have a shield. Do you understand? The system was burned out completely, and we ripped it free. You are *totally exposed*.”

“Understood,” I said, strapping in.

Dorgo pushed my helmet into my hands. *My* helmet, with my callsign on it. “Other than the shield, your acclivity ring is going to be your biggest

worry,” he said. “It’s on the fritz, and I can’t say if it will cut out or not. Control sphere also got a write-up in our assessment.” He eyed me. “Eject still works.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because you’re smarter than most,” he said.

“Destructors?” I said.

“Still functional,” he said. “You’re lucky. We were going to scrap those tonight.”

“I’m not sure this counts as lucky,” I said, pulling on the helmet. “But it’s all we’ve got.” I gave him a thumbs-up.

He raised his own thumb as his team pulled the ladder away, and my canopy lowered and sealed.

Admiral Judy “Ironsides” Ivans stood in the command center. Hands clasped behind her back, she regarded a hologram projected from the floor, complete with tiny ships in formation.

The shipyard had been a decoy all along. Judy had been played; the Krell had anticipated what she would do, and used that knowledge.

It was one of the oldest rules of warfare. If you knew what your enemy was going to do, the battle was already half won.

At her quiet order, the holoprojection switched to the second group of enemy ships that were approaching Alta. Fifteen Krell. Glowing blue wedges, now visible to close-range radar, which was far more accurate than the long-range ones.

It showed that one of those ships was, indeed, a bomber.

The ships inched closer to the death zone—an invisible line past which, if they dropped a lifebuster, they’d destroy Alta. The Krell wouldn’t stop there though. They’d fly inward and try to drop it square on top of the base. That way, their bomb would penetrate all the way down and destroy Igneous.

*I have doomed all of humankind.* Ivans thought.

Fifteen blips of blue. Unopposed.

Then, rising from Alta, a single lonely blip of red appeared. A Defiant ship.

“Rikolfr?” Ironsides said. “Did the private owners actually respond to my call? Are they scrambling their fighters?” There were only eight of those in

the deep caverns, but they would be better than nothing. Perhaps enough to prevent a disaster.

“No, sir,” Rikolfr said. “Last we heard, they were planning to evacuate.”

“Then who is that ship?” Ironsides asked.

All around the frantic command room, people turned from their workstations to look at the hologram and its single blip of red. A voice popped in on the flightleader channel. “Do I have this right? Confirm? This is Skyward Ten, callsign: Spin.”

It was her.

“The defect,” Ironsides whispered.

## 50

“This is Flight Command,” Ironsides said on my radio. “Cadet, where did you get that ship?”

“Does it matter?” I asked. “Give me a heading. Where are those Krell?”

“There are *fifteen ships* in that flight, girl.”

I swallowed. “Heading?”

“57-113.2-15000.”

“Right.” I redirected and punched my overburn. GravCaps engaged for the first few seconds, then I gritted my teeth as the g-forces hit me. My Poco started to rattle under the strain, even at the relatively slow speed of Mag-5. Scud. What was keeping this ship together? Spit and prayers?

“How long until they’re inside the death zone?” I asked.

“Under eight minutes,” Ironsides said. “By our projections, you’ll reach them in about two minutes.”

“Great,” I said, taking a deep breath, inching my ship up to Mag-6. I didn’t dare go faster with the amount of drag on that burned-out wing. “We might have a few more reinforcements coming. When you see them, tell them what’s happening.”

“There are more of you?” Ironsides asked.

“I hope so.” Depended on whether Arturo and the others managed to steal some ships. “I’ll just have to hold the Krell off until then. By myself. With a ship that doesn’t have a shield.”

“You *don’t have a shield?*”

“I have visual confirmation on the Krell,” I said, ignoring the question. “Here we go!”

Krell ships swarmed toward me. I knew there were only fifteen, but flying there—alone, unprotected—it seemed like an entire armada. I



immediately cut to the side, destructors flashing all around me. I picked up at *least* a dozen on my tail, and my proximity warning went insane.

I pulled into a hard bank, wishing there were debris I could use for faster maneuvering. I curved around—somehow avoiding being shot—until I saw it. One slower, larger ship. Plodding along with an enormous bomb held underneath it, nearly as big as the ship itself.

“Flight Command,” I said, pushing into a dive, destructors spraying around me, “I have visual confirmation of a lifebuster.”

“Bring it down, cadet,” the admiral said immediately. “You hear me. If you get a shot, *bring that ship down.*”

“Affirmative,” I said, and threw myself into a spinning loop. My GravCap indicator flashed, its brief dampening effect expended, and the g-forces flattened me into the side of the cockpit and my seat.

I remained conscious—somehow—as a couple of Krell ships cut across in front of me. My instincts were to chase them down.

*No.* They were presenting targets to draw me away. I dodged the other direction, and the ships behind me fired an insane storm of destructors.

I wouldn’t last long in this fight. I couldn’t hold out for Arturo and the others. The Krell would finish me off before then.

I had to get to the bomber.

The Krell tried to drive me to the side, but I dodged between two of them, my ship rattling as I crossed their wakes. That didn’t normally happen; the atmospheric scoops evened out flight wakes. Mine was still working, fortunately, but was obviously in poor shape.

Teeth rattling in my skull from the shaking, I cut around more ships and focused on my goal, unleashing a barrage of destructors.

A few hit the bomber, but were absorbed by its shield, and I wasn’t close enough for an IMP. The small, strange ships that accompanied the bomber detached and flew up toward me, driving me off to the side.

I swept in a long turn, trying to ignore the fact that I was now being chased by almost two flights’ worth of enemies.

I focused on my ship. On my maneuvers.

Me, the controls, and the ship. Together, responding to . . .

*Right.*

I dodged away just before a Krell ship moved to cut me off.

*They’re going to fire all out.* I dove underneath a sudden, concentrated barrage.

*Left.* I made a sweeping turn by instinct, spinning between two enemy ships—causing them to collide.

It was uncanny. But somehow, somehow I could hear it in my mind. Somehow I knew . . . the commands that were being sent to the enemy ships.

I could *hear* them.

Judy stood quietly beside the hologram, and slowly, aides and junior admirals gathered around. By now they'd disengaged all flights from the battle for the shipyard, and had sent them streaking back toward Alta.

They'd be too slow. Even Riptide Flight, which she had ordered back earlier, was too far out. Right now, all that mattered was one speck of red among the swarm of blue. One *magnificent* red speck that wove between enemy attacks, somehow avoiding destruction time and time again.

Somehow, she faced overwhelming odds and *survived*.

"Have you ever seen flying like that before?" Rikolfr asked.

Judy nodded.

She had. In one other pilot.

I couldn't explain it. I somehow *sensed* the orders that were coming from above, telling the Krell ships what to do. I could hear them . . . hear them processing, thinking.

It wasn't an overwhelming edge, but it was enough. Just that little bit I needed to fly my rattling Poco in another loop, where I fired again on the bomber.

*That's five hits.* I thought as I was forced back once more by the four black guardian ships. The bomber's shield should be nearly down. Cobb's training kicked in, warning me to be ready to over-burn away as soon as I dropped the bomber. Once the lifebuster hit the ground, the blast would . . .

"Spin?" It was Jorgen's voice.

It almost kicked me out of my concentration. I spun my ship, dodging.

"Spin, is that you?" he asked. "My flightleader mentioned you were on the channel. What's happening?"

"I'm . . .," I said through gritted teeth. "I'm having a blast without you. More. Krell. For. Me."

“I’m with Riptide Flight,” Jorgen said. “We’re coming to help.”

Clever quips and bravado escaped me. “Thank you,” I whispered, sweat plastering the inside of my helmet as I tried to come around for another pass.

Red blasts descended upon me, slicing at my ship. But I could dodge them. I knew what they—

An explosion cut across my ship, blasting the tip off the nose of the Poco. Something had shot me, something I couldn’t anticipate.

My Poco rattled, nose trailing smoke, my console basically just a huge expanse of red lights. I still had maneuverability, however, and dodged to the side.

*That shot. I thought. One of the black ships hit me—and I can’t hear its orders in my mind.*

I rounded toward the bomber once again. I hit the triggers, and nothing happened. Scud . . . the destructors were on my nose. They’d been damaged in that hit.

My control sphere was rattling, threatening to go out. Exactly like Dorgo had warned.

“You have one minute until that bomber reaches the death zone, Skyward Ten,” Ironsides said softly.

I didn’t respond, fighting to keep ahead of the swarming enemies.

“If it gets past the zone,” Ironsides said, “you have full authorization to shoot it down anyway. Do you confirm, pilot?”

Lifebusters were rigged to blow if they were shot or if they hit the ground. So if I dropped that bomber once it got too close, the blast would destroy Alta, but protect Igneous.

“Confirmed,” I said, swinging around.

*No weapons.*

I could hear the rushing air almost as if the canopy were gone. My nose was still on fire.

*Under a minute.*

I gained altitude, then turned into a dive, Krell ships still swarming behind.

*That bomber’s shield has to be almost out.*

I pointed my nose right at the bomber down below, then I hit the overburn.

“Cadet?” Ironsides said. “Pilot, what are you doing?”

“My weapons are gone,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “I have to ram it.”

“Understood,” Ironsides whispered. “Saints’ own speed, pilot.”

“What?” Jorgen said over the line. “What? Ram it? Spin!”

I dove toward the enemy bomber.

“Spin,” Jorgen said, voice barely audible over the blaring warnings and the roar of the air around my cockpit. “Spin, you’ll die.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “But I’ll win anyway.”

I streaked right toward the ship amid a column of enemy fire. Then—at long last, pushed too far—my poor, broken ship had had enough.

The acclivity ring cut out.

My ship pulled into an unexpected dive, and I undershot the bomber, missing it. Pummeled by the winds—and no longer held up by the acclivity ring—my ship started spinning out of control.

Everything became a blur of smoke and fire.

## 51

You weren't supposed to be able to think during those moments. It was all supposed to happen in a flash.

My hand moved by instinct toward the eject lever between my legs. My ship was in an uncontrolled spin with no altitude control. I was going to crash.

I froze.

Nobody else was close enough. Without me to stop them, the Krell would fly on unimpeded to destroy Igneous.

If I crashed, that was it.

I slammed my hand back onto the throttle. With my other hand I flipped off my atmospheric scoop, releasing my ship entirely to the whims of the air. Then I rammed the throttle forward, going into overburn.

In the old days, this was how ships had flown. I needed old-fashioned lift, and that came from speed.

My ship shook an insane amount, but I leaned into my control sphere, righting my spiral.

*Come on, come on!*

I felt it working. I fought the control flaps on the wings, and felt the g-forces lessen as my ship started to level out. I could do it. I—

I skidded against the ground.

The GravCaps redlined immediately, protecting me from the brunt of the impact. But unfortunately, I hadn't regained control fast enough, and the ship hadn't gained quite enough lift.

The ship skipped across the ground, and the second impact slammed me forward into my restraints, knocking the wind out of me. My poor Poco skidded along the dusty surface, cockpit rumbling. The canopy shattered

and I screamed. I had no control. I just had to brace and hope the GravCaps had enough time to recharge between—

*CRUNCH.*

With a gut-wrenching sound of twisting metal, the Poco ground to a halt.

I sagged against my straps, dazed, and the world spun around me. I groaned, trying to catch my breath.

Slowly, my vision returned to normal. I shook my head, then managed to slump to the side and look out the broken cockpit canopy. My ship was no more. I'd smashed into a hillside, and during my skid I'd ripped off both wings and a big chunk of the fuselage. I was basically a chair strapped to a tube. Even the warning lights on my control panel had died.

I had failed.

"Fighter down," someone at Flight Command said over the radio in my helmet. "Bomber still on target." Her voice grew hushed. "Death zone entered."

"This is Skyward Five," Arturo's voice said. "Callsign: Amphi. I've got Skyward Two and Six with me."

"Pilots?" Ironsides said. "Are you flying private ships?"

"Kind of," he said. "I'll let you explain it to my parents."

"Spin," someone at Flight Command said. "What's your status? We saw a controlled crash. Is your ship mobile?"

"No," I said, voice croaking.

"Spin?" Kimmalyn said. "Oh! What have you done?"

"Nothing, apparently," I said in frustration, working at my straps. Scudding things were stuck.

"Spin," Flight Command said. "Evacuate your wreckage. Krell incoming."

*Krell incoming?* I craned my neck and looked backward through my broken canopy. That black ship—one of the four that defended the bomber—had swung around in the sky to check on my wreckage. It obviously didn't want me returning to the air and attacking them from behind.

The dark ship flew low, bearing down on me. I knew, staring at it, that it wasn't going to leave my survival to chance. It wanted me. *It knew.*

"Spin?" Flight Command said. "Are you out?"

"Negative," I whispered. "I'm stuck in my straps."

"I'm coming!" Kimmalyn said.

“Negative!” Ironsides said. “You three focus on that bomber. You’re too far away anyway.”

“This is Riptide Eight,” Jorgen said over the line. “Spin, I’m coming! ETA six minutes!”

The black Krell ship opened fire on my wreckage.

At that exact moment, a dark shadow passed overhead, cresting the hill beside me, skimming it and sending dust raining down on me. The enemy destructors hit the newcomer’s shield.

What?

A large fighter with sharp wings . . . in a W shape.

“This is callsign: Mongrel,” a rough voice said. “Hang on, kid.”

Cobb. Cobb was *flying M-Bot*.

Cobb fired his light-lance, expertly spearing the dark Krell ship as they passed each other. M-Bot was by *far* the more massive vessel. He yanked the Krell assassin ship backward like a master pulling on her dog’s leash, then spun in a calculated maneuver—towing the enemy ship in a crazy arc, then *slamming* it into the ground.

“Cobb?” I said. “*Cobb?*”

“I believe,” his voice said over my radio, “that I told you to *eject* in situations like that, pilot.”

“Cobb! How? What?”

M-Bot swept to the side of my ship—well, what was left of it—then landed, lowering on his acclivity ring. With a little more work, I finally managed to yank out of my straps.

I nearly tripped as I scrambled from the wreckage and ran over. I hopped onto a rock, then climbed on M-Bot’s wing as I had done so many times before. Cobb sat nestled into the open cockpit, and beside him—sitting on the armrest—was the radio I’d given him. The one that . . .

“Hello!” M-Bot said to me from the cockpit. “You have nearly died, and so I will say something to distract you from the serious, mind-numbing implications of your own mortality! I hate your shoes.”

I laughed, nearly hysterical.

“I didn’t want to be predictable,” M-Bot added. “So I said that I hate them. But actually, I think those shoes are quite nice. Please do not think I have lied.”

Inside the cockpit Cobb was shaking. His hands quivering, his eyes staring straight ahead.

“Cobb,” I said. “You got in a ship. You *flew*.”

“This thing,” he said, “is *insane*.” He turned toward me, and seemed to come out of his stupor. “Help me.” He unstrapped, and I helped him pull himself out.

Scud. He looked terrible. Flying for the first time in years had taken a great deal out of him.

He hopped down off the wing. “You need to drive that bomber back into the sky. Don’t let it blow up and vaporize me. I haven’t had my afternoon cup of coffee yet.”

“Cobb,” I said, leaning down and looking at him from the wing. “I . . . thought I heard Krell in my mind. They can get inside my head somehow.”

He reached up and gripped my wrist. “Fly anyway.”

“But what if I do what he did? What if I turn against my friends?”

“You won’t,” M-Bot said from the cockpit.

“How do you know?”

“Because you can choose,” M-Bot said. “*We* can choose.”

I looked to Cobb, who shrugged. “Cadet, at this point, what do we have to lose?”

I gritted my teeth, then dropped down into M-Bot’s familiar cockpit. I pulled on my helmet, then did up the straps as the booster powered back on.

“I called him,” M-Bot said, sounding satisfied.

“But how?” I said. “You turned off.”

“I . . . didn’t *completely* turn off,” the machine said. “Instead, I thought. And I thought. And I *thought*. And then I heard you calling me. Begging for my help. And then . . . I wrote a new program.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It was a simple program,” he said. “It edited one entry in a database, while I wasn’t looking, replacing one name with another. I *must* follow the commands of my pilot.”

A voice played out of his speakers. My voice.

“Please,” it said to him. “I need you.”

“I chose,” he said, “a new pilot.”

Cobb backed away and I settled my hands on the controls, breathing in and out, feeling . . .

Calm.

Yes, calm. That feeling reminded me of how, on that first day in flight school, I’d felt strangely at peace when going into battle. I’d been



impressed by how *not* afraid I was.

It had been ignorance then. Bravado. I'd assumed I knew what it was to be a pilot. I'd assumed I could handle it.

This peace was similar, yet at the same time opposite. It was the peace of experience and understanding. As we rose into the air, I found a different kind of confidence rising inside me. Not born of stories I told myself, or of a forced sense of heroism.

I knew.

When I'd been shot down the first time, I'd ejected because there had been no point in dying with my ship. But when it had mattered—when it had been vital that I attempt to protect my ship with even the *slightest* chance of success—I'd stayed in the cockpit and tried to keep my ship in the air.

My confidence was that of a person who *knew*. Nobody could ever again convince me I was a coward. It didn't matter what anyone said, anyone thought, or anyone claimed.

I knew what I was.

"Are you ready?" M-Bot said.

"For the first time ever, I think I am. Give me all the speed you can. Oh, and turn off your stealth devices."

"Really?" he said. "Why?"

"Because," I said, leaning into the throttle, "I want them to *see this coming*."

Judy “Ironside” Ivans watched as the Krell force pushed ever closer to Alta.

Radio chatter filled the command room, but it wasn’t the usual battle chatter. Powerful families radioed in, announcing that they were escaping in their own ships. Cowards, every one. Deep down, Judy had known how this would play out, but it still broke her heart.

Rikolfr stepped up to her, bearing reports. He was the only other one who was still watching the holoprojector. Everyone else was in chaos as operators and junior admirals called frantic alarms to those in Igneous, ordering emergency evacuation.

For all the good it would do.

“How long until the bomber reaches Alta?” Judy asked.

“Under five minutes,” Rikolfr said. “Do we evacuate the command center down to one of the deep caverns? They might be safe enough.”

She shook her head.

Rikolfr swallowed, but kept talking. “The last line of emergency gun emplacements has radioed in. The Krell fighters are flying in close, engaging them. Three are down, the other three taking heavy fire.”

There were always supposed to be fighters to help the gun emplacements. Judy nodded toward the three small red blips on the hologram, flying out to engage the enemy. Stolen fighters, she now knew. Patriots, truly Defiant.

“Put me through to those fighters,” she said, then activated her headset and spoke. “Skyward Flight?”

“Here, sir,” said callsign: Amphi. That was Valda’s son. What was his name? Arturo? “Pilot,” she said, “you have to shoot down that bomb. In

under five minutes, it will be in position to destroy Igneous. Do you understand? I authorize destroying that bomb with all prejudice.”

“But Alta, sir?” the boy asked.

“Already dead,” she said. “*I* am dead. Drop that bomb. You have three fighters against sixteen.” She checked the reports. “In two minutes, Riptide Flight will join you. They have six more fighters, three of which are scouts. The rest of our forces are too far away to matter.”

“Understood, Flight Command,” the boy said, sounding nervous. “Stars guide you.”

“And you, flightleader.”

She stepped back to watch the battle.

“Admiral!” a radio tech shouted. “Sir! We have an unidentified fighter approaching! Adding it to the hologram now!”

A green blip appeared, distant from the impending clash of ships, but approaching at a *shocking* speed.

Rikolfr gasped. Judy frowned.

“Sir,” the tech said. “That ship is flying at *Mag-20*. Any of our ships would have broken apart at those speeds.”

“What have the Krell found to throw at us now?” Judy murmured to herself.

“Flight Command,” a familiar girl’s voice said over the line, “this is Skyward Eleven, reporting for battle. Callsign: Spin.”

M-Bot was going so fast, the heat of air resistance lit up his shield in a fiery glow. We tore through the air as a streaking ball of fire, but I barely felt a faint tremble.

After the broken-down Poco, it was a dramatic contrast.

“I’m afraid I am still not fully operational,” M-Bot said. “Booster and thrusters: online. Acclivity ring and altitude controls: online. Communications and stealth systems: online. Light-lance: online. Cytonic hyperdrive: offline. Self-repair: offline. Destructors: offline.”

“No weapons,” I said. “Stars forbid I actually get a *functioning* ship for once.”

“I would be offended at that,” M-Bot said, “if I could get offended. Also, don’t be so dour. At least my vocal aggression subroutine is online.”

“Your . . . what?”

“Vocal aggression subroutine. I figured if I was going to go into battle, I should enjoy the experience! So I wrote a new program to appropriately express myself.”

*Oh great.*

“Tremble and fear, all enemies!” he shouted. “For we shall shake the air with thunder and blood! Your doom is imminent!”

“Um . . .,” Kimmalyn’s voice said over the line. “Bless your stars, whoever you are.”

Wonderful. He’d called that in on the general channel? I guess now that his orders to “lie low” were no longer in effect, he didn’t care who heard him.

“That’s my ship talking, Quirk,” I said.

“Spin!” she said. “You found *another* ship?”

“One found me,” I said. “I’m bearing down on your seven, and should meet you at the battle in a few seconds.” M-Bot’s projections placed that right at the same time the others would arrive.

“Wait,” Nedd said. “Am I an idiot, or did Spin just say her *ship* spoke?”

“Hi, Nedd!” M-Bot said. “I can confirm you are an idiot, but all humans are. Your mental abilities appear to be within a standard deviation from their average.”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Actually, no it’s not. My ship can talk, and you should ignore him.”

“Quake and tremble at my majestic destructive power!” M-Bot added.

“You two sound well suited to each other,” Arturo said. “I’m glad you’re here, Spin. Do you . . . maybe have a plan?”

“Yes,” I said. “First, let’s see how they react to me. Stand by.”

I flipped M-Bot on his axis and overburned backward, slowing from our incredible approach. Even with his advanced GravCaps, I felt the g-forces slam me back in my seat. As soon as we hit Mag-2.5, I spun us around in the air and took assessment. Sixteen Krell fighters.

This was it. I had another chance.

Time to stop that bomb.

I sliced through the center of the Krell ships at speed, buzzing the bomber and its close guard of three remaining black ships. I turned upward and gave them a good view of M-Bot, with his wicked wings and dangerous silhouette. He had four destructor pods—which I hoped they wouldn’t see were empty—and an obviously advanced and powerful design.

The Krell always targeted what they considered the most dangerous ship or the one bearing an officer. I counted on them seeing M-Bot, and . . .

. . . and they *immediately* gave chase. A flock of thirteen ships, all but the three black ones, broke off and swarmed after me, firing a chaotic array of destructors.

Excellent. Terrifying, but excellent.

“We have to stay just ahead of them, M-Bot,” I said. “Keep them strung along, thinking they’ll get the upper hand on us at any moment.”

“Understood,” he said. “Yar.”

“Yar?”

“Assumed pirate-speak, but actually a stylized West Country accent popularized by the acting role of a specific individual. It’s supposed to be intimidating.”

“Okay . . .” I shook my head and eased us through a complex Ahlstrom loop.

“The holes in my memory *did* leave some eclectic tidbits,” he said. “Yar.”

I cut right, watching the proximity sensors, and noted that Arturo, Quirk, and Nedd had arrived.

“Is this all of us, Amphi?” I asked.

“Riptide Flight is incoming, about a minute and a half out,” Arturo said. “Jorgen is assigned with them, and a couple of older pilots I don’t know. I think they picked up some scouts on the way, so FM might be there too.”

“Great,” I said, grunting and turning my ship in another sequence of dodges. “Until they get here, see if you and Nedd can harry that bomber. Be careful, those black ships guarding it are more capable than your average Krell. Just try to drive the bomber away so it—”

“Negative,” Ironsides said over the line. Great. Of course she was listening. “Pilots, you bring down that bomber.”

“As much as I’d like you to sacrifice yourself, Ironsides,” I said, “let’s determine if we need that first. Amphi, Nedd, see what you can do.”

“Gotcha, Spin,” Nedd said.

“And me?” Kimmalyn asked.

“Hang back,” I said. “Take aim on that bomber. Wait until its shield is down and its guards are distracted.”

The private light on my comm flashed.

“Spensa . . .,” Kimmalyn said. “Are you sure you want to leave this to me? I mean . . .”

“I don’t have any weapons, Quirk,” I said. “It’s you or nobody. You can do it. Get ready.”

I dove low, destructor blasts flashing all around me. We skimmed the ground, my entourage following like an angry swarm of insects. Scud. I could see Alta right ahead. We were *close*.

Up above, Nedd and Arturo engaged the bomber’s black guards. I didn’t have time to pay attention, as I was forced to dodge in another direction, bolting out of the way of a force of Krell that had looped around to try to cut me off.

A couple of destructor blasts hit M-Bot’s shield.

“Hey!” M-Bot said. “Just for that, I shall hunt your firstborn children and laugh with glee as I tell them of your death in terrible detail, with many unpleasant adjectives!”

I groaned. He’d said it over the group channel again.

“Please tell me,” I said, “that I don’t sound like *that*.”

The others didn’t reply.

“A pox of unique human diseases—many of which cause an uncomfortable swelling—come upon you!”

“Oh, scud. That *is* how I sound, isn’t it?” I gritted my teeth, hitting the booster to cut ahead of the enemy. There were so many of them. All they needed were a few lucky shots.

But all I needed was to keep them busy for a little longer. I cut right and speared one with my light-lance, using its momentum to spin me in a tight turn. I darted around its companions as I released the one I’d lanced, sending it flying in an awkward tumble.

*Now up.* I cut up and around a hillside, moving away before the Krell could corner me.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said.

*Down.* I dove, right before some Krell ships tried to cut me off in the other direction.

“How are you doing that?” he asked.

*Right.* I turned through the center of some ships coming at me. Destructor blasts skimmed my wings, but not a single shot landed.

“You’re reacting,” he said, “to things they haven’t *done yet*.”

I could sense their orders in the back of my mind. Quiet yet piercing, the commands traveled from above down to these Krell. They were

communicating using another space, another place—and I could tap into it. Listen in on their commands.

I was somehow internalizing their commands, and responding to them before I knew what I was doing.

I tried not to let that freak me out.

M-Bot was incredibly agile, capable of quick boosts and deliberate slices in one direction or another. As I flew, it seemed as if I could *feel him*—feel the very lines of electricity that passed my orders through his fuselage. I flew with the immediate, unconscious skill of a person flexing their muscles. With the precision of a cautious surgeon, but the frenetic energy of the strongest athlete. It was *incredible*.

I was so consumed that I almost missed it as Arturo radioed in. “Spin, this isn’t working. Those black ships refuse to be pulled away from the bomber. They engage us if we get close, but fall back when we draw away. And the bomber is still flying on a steady course.”

“ETA until the enemy reaches position to destroy Igneous?” I asked.

“Under two minutes,” M-Bot said. “At current speed of—”

“This is Riptide leader, callsign: Terrier,” a male voice said. “What in the *North Star’s light* is happening here?”

“No time to explain,” I said. “Flightleader, take everything you have and hit those black ships that are protecting the bomber.”

“And who are *you*?”

I turned—followed by my train of angry Krell ships—and buzzed over the six newcomers who had just arrived at the battle. I could barely get a visual on them because the destructor fire around me was so thick. I took another hit, and a fourth.

“Shield at forty percent strength,” M-Bot noted.

I stayed ahead of most of the enemies, finding the holes between shots, my instincts somehow reading the Krell motions.

Stars appeared in my vision. Pinpricks of light.

The eyes.

Jorgen’s voice rang through the channel. “Sir, with all due respect, she’s a person you should listen to. *Now*.”

Terrier grunted, then said, “Riptide Flight, all ships, engage those black fighters.”

“Not all,” I said, spinning right. “Jorgen, FM, you there?”

“Here, Spin,” FM said.

“You two. Take position near that bomber. I’m going to lead this swarm of Krell back around to it and hopefully give you enough of a distraction to get in close. When that happens, I need you to *IMP that bomber*. We don’t have much time left.”

“Roger,” Jorgen said. “On me, FM?”

“Gotcha.”

I swung in a wide loop, passing by Kimmalyn—who flew carefully out beyond the main battlefield. My entourage ignored her, presuming me to be the dangerous one.

“Quirk,” I said over a private channel. “I need you to shoot that bomber.”

“If that ship crashes, it will detonate the bomb,” Kimmalyn said. “You’ll die. You’ll all die. Even if you escape, everyone in Alta will die.”

“Do you think you can knock the ship’s engines out? Or do something to get that bomber to drop the bomb?”

“A shot like that would—”

“Kimmalyn. What would the Saint say?”

“I don’t know!”

“Then what would *you* say? Remember? The first day we met?”

I banked and spun back toward the bomber. Terrier and his ships, along with Arturo and Nedd, had thrown themselves at the black fighters. I bore down on it all, bringing the rest of the ships in to create a chaotic, frenzied jumble.

“Under thirty seconds,” M-Bot said softly.

“You told me to take a deep breath,” I said to Kimmalyn. “Reach up . . .”

“Pluck a star,” she whispered.

My arrival—and the ships chasing me—created the confusion I’d anticipated. Ships darted in every direction, and the black ships scattered out of the way, trying to avoid collisions with their own vessels.

In my mind, I heard a specific Krell order sent to the bomber. The eyes accompanied me, somehow growing brighter—more hateful—as I heard the Krell chatter in my mind.

*Initiate countdown to detonation at one hundred seconds.*

“M-Bot!” I said. “Someone above just set the bomb to explode on a one-hundred-second countdown!”

“How do you know?”

“I can hear them!”



“Hear them how? They aren’t using radio that I can monitor!” He paused.  
“Can you *hear* their superluminal communications?”

I caught a flash to my right. “IMP struck!” FM shouted, excited.  
“Bomber shields down!”

“Quirk, *fire!*” I screamed.

A line of red light pierced the battlefield. It passed between Krell ships, went right over Jorgen’s wing as he overburned away from the bomber.

And damn me if it didn’t spear the *exact spot* between the bomber and the bomb, severing the clamps. The bomber continued flying forward.

But the bomb, cut free, dropped.

“Lifebuster dropped!” Terrier shouted. “All ships, overburn out! Now!”

Everyone scattered, Krell included. Everyone but me.

I dove.

“Lifebuster dropped,” Riptide flightleader shouted. “All ships, overburn out! Now!”

Judy let out a long sigh as she stood, hands behind her back, watching the hologram. Around her, in the command center, a few people clapped. A few others prayed. Rikolfr wept.

Judy just watched the bomb fall. She’d done what she could. Perhaps humankind could rebuild, with the remaining ships that survived. Perhaps the Defiants would continue on.

They’d do it without Alta. She braced herself. Ships scattered, to try to escape the blast. All but one.

That one dove toward the bomb.

“The defect,” Judy whispered.

I speared the bomb with my light-lance, then pulled up in a curve that overwhelmed M-Bot’s incredible GravCaps. The force pressed me against my seat as, by a narrow margin, I crested a dusty hillside—towing the lifebuster bomb after me.

M-Bot put up a timer, mirroring the one on the bomb. Forty-five seconds.

“We need to get this thing outside the death zone,” I said, slamming the throttle full forward and putting everything into an overburn away.

“This will be close,” he said. “I’m extending the atmospheric scoop so we don’t rip that bomb off our light-lance as we accelerate, but above Mag-16 the scoop’s envelope will shrink too much to fully shelter the bomb, so that’s our max for now . . .”

We tore away from Alta, accelerating to speeds no DDF ship could have managed, despite that restriction. I felt the g-forces even through his GravCaps. We careened through the middle of a pack of DDF ships—they were gone in a blink.

“We’re going to make it!” M-Bot said. “Just barely. But we’ll . . . Oh.”

“What?” I asked.

“We’ll be in the middle of the blast when it explodes, Spensa. And I don’t want to die. This is very inconvenient.”

The countdown hit ten. Ahead, I saw a swarm of black dots in the air. Krell chasing after the DDF ships.

“There has to be a way out of this!” M-Bot said. “Booster and thrusters: online. No, not fast enough. Acclivity ring and altitude controls: online. Can we rise quickly enough? No, no, no!”

I felt at peace. Serene.

“Communications and stealth systems: online, but useless. Light-lance: online, carrying the bomb. If we drop it too soon, the wave will hit Alta.”

I sank into the ship, feeling—*becoming*—his very processors as they worked. I felt the number counting down to three.

“Self-repair: offline. Destructors: offline.”

Two.

I felt, more than saw, the blossom of the bomb’s first explosion behind. And I felt, more than heard, M-Bot’s diagnostic tool working.

“Biological component engaged,” his voice said.

One.

“Cytonic hyperdrive: online.”

An explosion of fire surrounding us.

“*What?*” M-Bot said. “Spin! Engage the—”

I did something with my mind.

We vanished, leaving a ship-size hole in the expanding blossom of flame and destruction.

In that moment between heartbeats, I felt myself enter someplace dark. A place not just black, a place of *nothingness*. Where matter did not, and could not, exist.

In that moment between heartbeats, I somehow stopped *being*. yet didn't stop *experiencing*. A field of white appeared around me—a billion stars. Like eyes opening at once, shining upon me.

Ancient things stirred. And in that moment between heartbeats, they not only saw me, but they *knew me*.

I jolted from that place that was not a place, and felt like I'd slammed into my straps, as if I'd been thrown physically back into the cockpit. I gasped, heart racing, sweat streaming down my face.

My ship hovered, still and quiet, lights blinking out on the control panel.

"Cytonic hyperdrive offline," M-Bot said.

"What," I said, gasping for breath. "What was that?"

"I don't know!" he said. "But my instruments place us at—calculating—one hundred kilometers from the point of detonation. Wow. My internal chronometer indicates no discrepancy between our time and solar time, so we experienced no time dilation—but somehow we traveled that distance virtually instantaneously. Faster than light, certainly."

I leaned back in my seat. "Call Alta. Are they safe?"

The channel came on, and I heard whoops and screams—it took a moment to distinguish those as cheers of joy, not terror.

"Alta Base," M-Bot said. "This is Skyward Eleven. You may commence thanking us for saving you from utter annihilation."

"Thank you!" some voices cried. "Thank you!"

“Mushrooms are the preferred offering,” M-Bot said to them. “As many varieties as you can dig up.”

“Really?” I said, pulling off my helmet to wipe my brow. “Still on the mushroom thing?”

“I didn’t erase that part of my programming,” he said. “I’m fond of it. It gives me something to collect, like the way humans choose to accumulate useless items of sentimental and thematic value.”

I grinned, though I couldn’t shake the haunting feeling of those eyes watching me. Those . . . *some things* knew what I’d done, and they didn’t like it. Perhaps there had been a reason that M-Bot’s faster-than-light capacities had been offline.

That raised a question, of course. Could we do that again? Gran-Gran said that her mother had *been* the engine of the *Defiant*. That she had made it work.

*The answer is not to fear the spark, but to learn to control it.*

I looked upward, toward the sky.

And there, I saw *a hole*. The debris shifting just right to reveal the stars. Exactly like . . . that day when I’d been with my father. My first time to the surface.

It seemed too momentous to be a coincidence.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “The admiral is trying to contact you, but you have your helmet off.”

I absently put my helmet back on, still staring at that hole in the debris. That pathway to infinity. Could I . . . hear something out there? Calling to me?

“Spensa,” the admiral said. “How did you survive that blast?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered truthfully.

“I suppose I’m going to need to pardon your father now,” she said.

“You just survived a lifebuster explosion by a few meters,” I said, “and still, all you can think about is that old grudge?”

The admiral fell silent.

Yes. I . . . I could hear the stars.

*Come to us.*

“Spensa,” she said. “You need to know something about your father. About that day. We’ve lied, but for your own good.”

“I know,” I said, flipping controls, turning my ship’s acclivity ring on its hinges so it pointed downward. My ship rotated so the nose pointed

upward. Skyward.

“Return to base,” the admiral said. “Return to honors and celebration.”

“I will. Eventually.”

*Their heads are heads of rock, their hearts set upon rock.*

“Spensa. There is a defect inside you. Please. You need to come back. Every moment you spend in the sky is a danger to you and to everyone else.”

*Be different. Set your sights on something higher.*

“My ship doesn’t have destructors,” I said absently. “If I come back crazy, you should be able to shoot me down.”

“Spin,” Ironsides said, her voice pained. “Don’t do this.”

*Something more grand.*

“Goodbye, Admiral,” I said, flipping off the comm.

Then I hit the overburn, launching upward.

*Claim the stars.*

I knew it was stupid.

The admiral was right. I should have returned to the base.

But I couldn't. Not only because I could hear the stars calling to me, luring me. Not only because of what had happened in that place between heartbeats.

I wasn't being controlled by something else. At least I didn't think I was. But I *had* to know. I *had* to confront it.

I *had* to see what my father had seen.

We soared higher, higher, up where the atmosphere faded and we could see the planet's curve. Still higher, aiming for that gap through the debris field.

I drew closer than I ever had before, and this time I was struck by how deliberate it all looked. We called it a debris field, but it really wasn't debris. There was a *shape* to all of this. An intent.

Enormous platforms that shined light downward. Others that looked like the shipyards. Together they formed a sequence of broken shells around our planet. And they had aligned just right to create an opening through them.

I passed into that large gap. If I veered too far to the sides, I'd likely be in range of the defensive guns that Cobb had mentioned. But here, traveling through this impromptu corridor, I was safe.

As I passed the first layer of debris, M-Bot said we'd entered space proper—though he also said the line between atmosphere and not was an “arbitrary distinction, as the exosphere doesn't end, but instead fades.”

My breath caught in awe as we passed enormous platforms that could have held Alta a thousand times over or more. They were covered with what

appeared to be buildings—each silent, dark. Millions upon millions of them.

*People lived up here, once.* I thought. I soared past several layers. By now we were going at incredible speeds—Mag-55—but without wind resistance, it didn't really matter. Speed was relative in space.

I looked away from the platforms, toward the end of the corridor. Out there were still, calm lights.

"Spensa," M-Bot said. "I'm detecting radio communication ahead. One of those specks is not a star."

I leaned forward as we passed another layer of debris. Yes, ahead I could see a glowing spot that was much closer than the stars. A ship? No, a space station. Shaped like a spinning top, with lights on all sides.

Smaller specks moved about it. Ships. I adjusted our course, pointing toward the station. Beneath us a platform revolved in its orbit, cutting off my sight of the shrinking shape of Detritus. Could I get back? Did I even care?

I could hear them louder, the voices of the stars. Chatter that didn't come through the radio, and didn't form words. The call of the stars . . . it was . . . it was *Krell communication*. They used that place between heartbeats to talk to one another, to communicate instantly. And . . . and the minds of thinking machines somehow relied upon the same technology to process quickly.

It all required access to that not-place, that *nowhere*.

We drew closer to the station. "Don't they know it's dangerous?" I whispered. "That something *lives* in the nowhere? Don't they know about the eyes?"

*Maybe that's why we only use radio.* I thought. *Why our ancestors abandoned this advanced communications technology. Our ancestors were frightened of what lived in the nowhere.*

"I'm confused as to what you mean," M-Bot said. "Though the Krell are using some normal sublight communications in addition to the superluminal ones. The ordinary ones, I can crack and listen in. Working to translate."

I slowed M-Bot, passing ships that turned toward mine. These didn't appear to be fighters; they were boxy, with large open windows at the front.

In that moment, something *hit* me, like a physical force. It crawled inside my brain, made my vision fuzz. I screamed, sagging in my straps.

"Spensa!" M-Bot said. "What's wrong? What is happening?"



I could only whimper. The *pain*. And . . . impressions. They were sending images. They were . . . they were trying to overwrite . . . what I was seeing .

“Engaging stealth and jamming!” M-Bot said. “Spensa, I’m reading unusual signals. Spensa?”

The voices vanished. The pain evaporated. I let out a long, relieved sigh.

“Don’t die, okay?” M-Bot said. “If you do, I’ll probably have to make Rodge my pilot. It would be the most logical move, and we’d both *hate* it so much.”

“I’m not going to die,” I said, leaning back, tapping my helmet against the seat’s headrest. “I do have a defect. A hole inside me.”

“Humans have many holes in them. Would you like me to provide you with a list?”

“Please don’t.”

“Ha ha. That was humor.”

“I have a hole in my brain,” I said. “It can see into the nowhere, but they can use it against me. I think . . . I think my father was shown some kind of mind hologram. When he flew back down to Detritus, he saw what the enemy wanted him to.”

I remembered what he’d said. *I will kill you. I will kill you all* . . . He’d been so mournful, so soft. He thought the humans had lost—that his friends were already dead. What he’d seen hadn’t been reality.

“When he blew up his friends,” I whispered, “he *thought* he was shooting down the Krell.”

A small number of the boxy ships approached M-Bot in the blackness. They struck me as couriers or maybe towing devices. Through the wide glass fronts, I saw creatures that looked vaguely like the drawings we had of Krell. Dark forms in armor, with red eyes.

Only here, they were bright colors—a perky red and blue, not dark at all. They reminded me a little of the pictures of crabs I’d seen from Old Earth, during my ancient biology courses. And the “armor” they wore seemed more like some kind of living apparatus, with open plates on the “head” portion for the creatures to see out of.

The sides of the little ships were stenciled with what looked to be words in a strange language.

“*Ketos redgor Earthen listro listrins*,” M-Bot said, reading the words. “Roughly, in English, that means ‘Penitentiary maintenance and

containment of Earthlings.’ ”

Scud. That . . . sounded ominous. “Can you tell me what they’re saying?”

“There’s some radio chatter nearer the station,” he said, “but I suspect these ships are communicating using faster-than-light cytonic devices.”

“Relax whatever you’re doing to shield us,” I said, “but don’t put it down entirely. If I scream again, or go crazy, put it back up.”

“Okay . . .,” M-Bot said. “You already seem crazy to me, but I guess that’s nothing new.”

Awareness returned to me, the voices in the darkness of space. I could hear their words, the ones they were sending through the nowhere. I knew them, even without needing a translation, because in that place all languages were one.

“It’s *looking* at me!” one of the creatures was saying. “I think it wants to eat me. I don’t like this at all!”

“It should be incapacitated now,” a communication returned from the space station. “And if it’s looking at you, it doesn’t see you. We are overwriting its vision. Tow the ship in for study. That’s not a standard DDF model. We’re curious how they built it.”

“I don’t want to get anywhere near it,” said another one of the creatures. “Don’t you know how dangerous these things are?”

Curious, I looked out of my canopy at a ship drawing closer, then I made a kind of growling face—baring my teeth. The creature screamed and immediately turned its ship around and fled. The other two tugboat-style ships backed away.

“This is a job for fighter drones,” one said. “Not manned ships.”

They sounded so *scared*. Not like the terrible monsters I’d always imagined.

I relaxed in my seat.

“Would you like me to try to hack their systems?” M-Bot said.

“Can you do that?”

“It’s not as easy as it might sound,” he said. “I have to piggyback on an incoming signal, and then decrypt their passwords and create a dummy login, then transfer files while spoofing an authorized request—breaching local data defense lines—all without tripping any of their alarms.”

“So, can you do it?”

“I just did,” he said. “That was a very long explanation. Beginning data transfer . . . And, they caught me. I’ve been booted, and security protocol is

preventing my reentry.”

Lights flashed on the station, and a moment later a squadron of small ships ejected from one of the bays on its side. I knew those flight patterns. Krell interceptors.

“Time to go,” I said, grabbing the controls and sweeping us around. “Do you think you can navigate us through the debris layers without triggering any of the defense platforms?”

“Supposedly, the Krell do that each time they attack the planet,” he said, “so it should be possible.”

I hit the overburn, launching us back toward the outer layer of debris. M-Bot put some directions on my canopy, and I followed, tense for the first bit. We skimmed close to some of the platforms as we weaved toward the planet, but none of them fired at us.

I felt . . . strangely alert. The sense of fascination I’d experienced earlier—the draw to seek out what was causing the stars to sing—had faded. It was replaced by stark realism.

Coming out here *really had* been crazy. Even for me. But as we wove past another layer of debris, the Krell interceptors fell back. It seemed, increasingly, that I’d be able to return to the planet safely.

“Did you get anything?” I asked. “From their computers?”

“I started with the station’s core orders and worked outward,” he said. “I didn’t get much, but . . . Oooh . . . You’re going to like this.”

“What?” I asked as I hit the overburn, flying back down toward Detritus. “What did you find?”

“Answers.”

## EPILOGUE

Two hours later, I sat in the DDF command center, holding a blanket around me, with my legs up on my seat. They'd given me Admiral Ironsides's chair.

Ever since that moment in the nowhere, I'd felt cold. A chill I couldn't shake, and which the blanket could barely help. My head still pounded, despite the metric ton of painkillers I'd swallowed.

A group of important people surrounded my chair, crowding me in. National Assembly Leaders, junior admirals, flightleaders. I was growing confident that they believed I wouldn't turn against them, though at first—after I'd reentered the atmosphere—they'd been very cautious.

The door to the command center opened, and finally Cobb limped in. I'd insisted on waiting until the transport fetched him and brought him back, and until he'd gotten his afternoon cup of coffee.

"All right," Ironsides said, folding her arms. "Captain Cobb is here. Can we talk *now*?"

I held up a finger. It might have been petty of me, but it felt *really* good to make Ironsides wait. Besides, there was someone else who deserved to be here before I explained.

As we waited, I reached for the radio at my side. "M-Bot," I said. "Everything all right?"

"I'm trying not to be offended by how the engineers in this hangar are looking at me," he said. "They seem overeager to rip me apart. But so far, nobody has tried anything."

"That ship is DDF—" Ironsides began.

“That ship,” I said, “*will* fry all his own systems if you try breaking into him. The DDF will get his tech, but it will be on our terms.”

The way she looked—red-faced—when I said it was *also* extremely satisfying. But she didn’t challenge me any further.

Finally the door opened again, and Jorgen entered. He was actually smiling, and it occurred to me that the expression—while pleasant—didn’t really suit him. He just looked more like himself when he was being serious.

He wasn’t the one we’d been waiting for, however. Instead, it was the lanky young man Jorgen had been sent to fetch. Rig grinned like a fool as he stepped into the room, then he blushed as the flightleaders and admirals parted for him, saluting. Though Ironsides was angry that Rig and I hadn’t turned the ship in immediately, most seemed to agree that when working with an insane AI that threatened to destroy itself, Rig had performed admirably in getting technology to the DDF.

“*Now* will you talk?” Ironsides demanded.

“The Krell are not what we think,” I said. “My ship downloaded some of their databases, and discovered what happened before our ancestors landed here on Detritus. There was a war. A vast intergalactic one. Humans against aliens.”

“Against the Krell,” Ironsides said.

“There were no Krell at the start of it,” I said. “Just us versus the galaxy. And humankind lost. The victors were a coalition of aliens who, as best M-Bot and I can tell, considered humankind too brutal, too uncivilized, and too aggressive to be allowed to be part of the intergalactic community.

“They demanded that all human fleets, independent or not, surrender to their authority. Our ancestors, on the *Defiant* and its small fleet, considered themselves innocent. They weren’t part of the war. But when they refused to turn themselves in, the alien coalition sent a group to capture or contain them. *That* is what we call the Krell.”

I closed my eyes. “They cornered us. And—after a conflict on board the *Defiant*—my great-grandmother brought us here, to Detritus. A planet we knew about, but which had been abandoned centuries before.

“The Krell followed us, and set up a station to watch us once we crashed. They’re not murderous aliens. They’re prison guards. A force designed to keep humankind trapped here, as some of the aliens are absolutely sure we will try to conquer the galaxy if we’re ever allowed to get back into space.

“The lifebusters were designed to annihilate our civilization if we seemed to be getting close to escaping Detritus. But most of the time they attacked, I don’t think they were trying to *actually* destroy us. They have laws against destroying a species entirely. They consider this planet like . . . a preserve for humankind. They sent ships to keep us focused on the fight, to occupy us, so we wouldn’t have time to research how to escape. And while the fighters always tried to keep our fleet down to size, they were only authorized to use a certain amount of force against us, lest they accidentally cause us to go extinct.”

I shivered despite the blanket. “Something changed recently, however,” I said. “It seems this last bomb really was meant to destroy us. There have been . . . politics about how much they should tolerate from us. They tried to destroy Alta and Igneous, but we defeated them. That has them scared.”

“Great, wonderful,” Ironsides said, folding her arms. “But this doesn’t change much. We know why the Krell are attacking, but they’re still a superior force. This will only make them more determined to extinguish us.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But the aliens who contain us? They *aren’t* warriors. They’re prison guards who fly mostly unmanned drones that don’t have to fight well—because they can overwhelm us with numbers.”

“Which is still the case,” Ironsides said. “We are low on resources, while they have better technology and an orbital fleet. We’re still basically doomed.”

“This is true,” I said.

“Then why are you smiling?” Ironsides demanded.

“Because,” I said, “I can hear what they’re saying to each other. And anytime you know what your enemy is going to do, you have an advantage. They think we’re trapped on this planet.”

“Aren’t we?” Jorgen asked.

I shivered again and thought of that moment when I’d been nowhere. The Krell knew they had to target any of us who flew too well—because they knew about the defect. They knew that someone who had it might be able to do as I’d done.

I didn’t know how I’d teleported my ship. I didn’t know if I dared do it again. But I knew, at the same time, that Gran-Gran was right. Using that power was the key. To survival. To escaping this planet.

To being truly Defiant.

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The Well of Ascension

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Arcanum Unbounded: The Cosmere Collection

Legion and the Emperor's Soul

Elantris

Warbreaker

Alcatraz

Snapshot (novella)



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THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRANDON  
SANDERSON

STARSIGHT

THE SEQUEL TO SKYWARD





For Eric James Stone,  
who has tried to show me how to be brief  
    (a lesson I've mostly failed to learn)  
but has been an amazing friend and role model nonetheless.

BRANDON  
SANDERSON

STARSIGHT  
THE SEQUEL TO SKYWARD

GOLLANCZ  
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# Contents

Dedication

Title page

## Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

## Part Two

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

## Part Three

Interlude

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23  
Chapter 24  
Chapter 25  
Chapter 26  
Chapter 27  
Chapter 28  
Chapter 29

#### Part Four

Interlude  
Chapter 30  
Chapter 31  
Chapter 32  
Chapter 33  
Chapter 34  
Chapter 35  
Chapter 36  
Chapter 37

#### Part Five

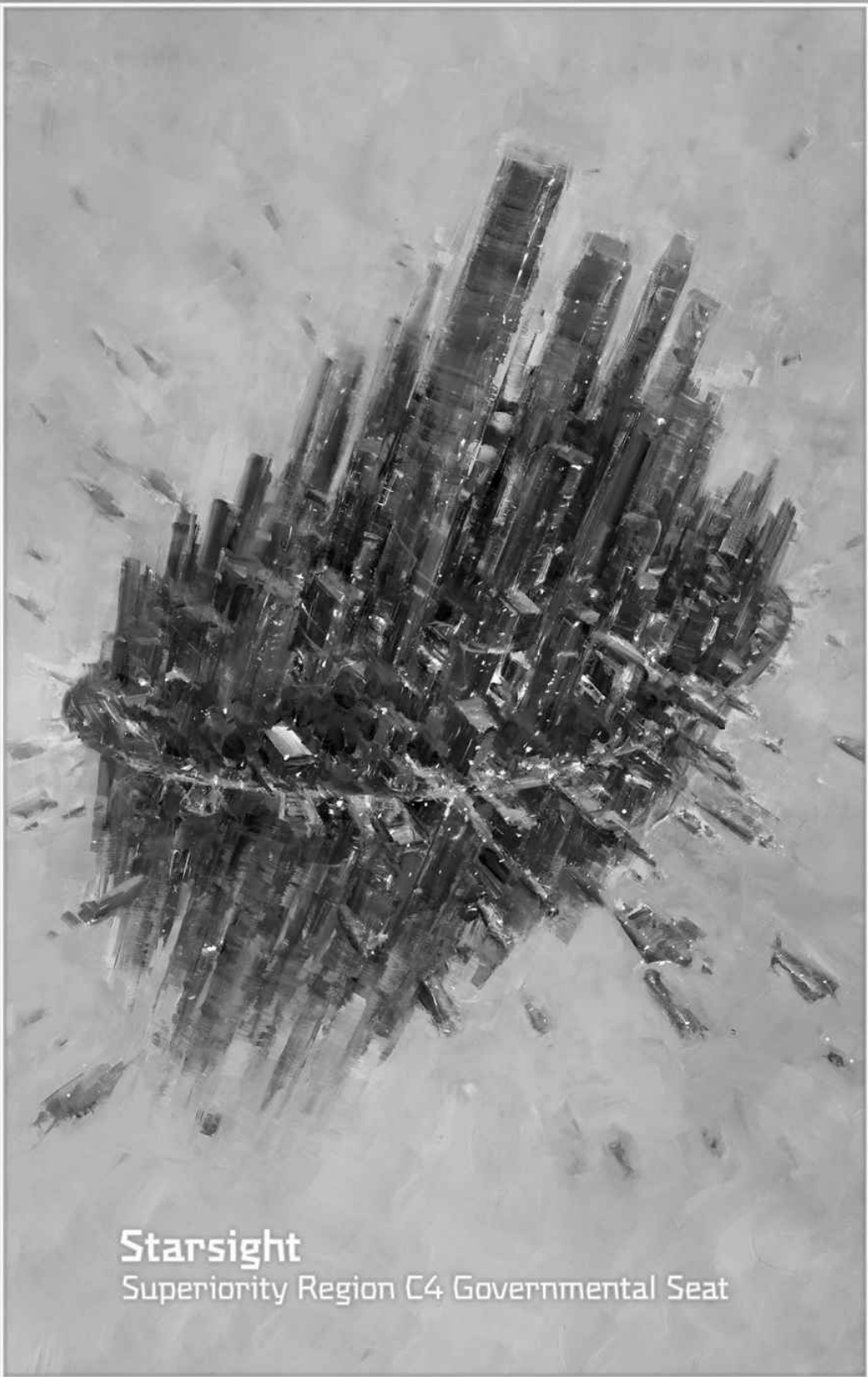
Chapter 38  
Chapter 39  
Chapter 40  
Chapter 41  
Chapter 42  
Interlude  
Chapter 43  
Chapter 44  
Epilogue

Acknowledgements

About the Author

By Brandon Sanderson

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**Starsight**

Superiority Region C4 Governmental Seat



# PART ONE

I slammed on my overburn and boosted my starship through the middle of a chaotic mess of destructor blasts and explosions. Above me extended the awesome vastness of space. Compared to that infinite blackness, both planets and starships alike seemed insignificant. Meaningless.

Except, of course, for the fact that those insignificant starships were doing their best to kill me.

I dodged, spinning my ship and cutting my boosters midturn. Once I'd flipped around, I immediately slammed on the boosters again, burning in the other direction in an attempt to lose the three ships tailing me.

Fighting in space is way different from fighting in atmosphere. For one thing, your wings are useless. No air means no airflow, no lift, no drag. In space, you don't really fly. You just don't fall.

I executed another spin and boost, heading back toward the main firefight. Unfortunately, maneuvers that had been impressive down in the atmosphere were commonplace up here. Fighting in a vacuum these last six months had provided a whole new set of skills to master.

"Spensa," a lively masculine voice said from my console, "you remember how you told me to warn you if you were being extra irrational?"

"No," I said with a grunt, dodging to the right. The destructor blasts from behind swept over the dome of my cockpit. "I don't believe I did anything of the sort."

"You said, 'Can we talk about this later?'"

I dodged again. Scud. Were those drones getting better at dogfighting, or was I losing my touch?

"Technically, it was 'later' right after you spoke," continued the talkative voice—my ship's AI, M-Bot. "But human beings don't actually use that word to mean 'anytime chronologically after this moment.' They use it to mean 'sometime after now that is more convenient to me.'"

The Krell drones swarmed around us, trying to cut off my escape back toward the main body of the battlefield.

“And you think *this* is a more convenient time?” I demanded.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because we’re in combat!”

“Well, I would think that a life-and-death situation is *exactly* when you’d like to know if you’re being extra irrational.”

I could remember, with some measure of fondness, the days when my starships *hadn’t* talked back to me. That had been before I’d helped repair M-Bot, whose personality was a remnant of ancient technology we still didn’t understand. I frequently wondered: Had all advanced AIs been this sassy, or was mine just a special case?

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “You’re supposed to be leading these drones toward the others, remember?”

It had been six months since we’d beaten back the Krell attempt to bomb us into oblivion. Alongside our victory, we’d learned some important facts. The enemy we called “the Krell” were a group of aliens tasked with keeping my people contained on our planet, Detritus, which was kind of a cross between a prison and a nature preserve for human civilization. The Krell reported to a larger galactic government called the Superiority.

They employed remote drones to fight us—piloted by aliens who lived far away, controlling their drones via faster-than-light communications. The drones were never driven by AIs, as it was against galactic law to let a ship pilot itself. Even M-Bot was severely limited in what he could do on his own. Beyond that, there was something that the Superiority feared deeply: people who had the ability to see into the space where FTL communication happened. People called cytonics.

People like me.

They knew what I was, and they hated me. The drones tended to target me specifically—and we could use that. We *should* use that. In today’s pre-battle briefing, I’d swayed the rest of the pilots reluctantly to go with a bold plan. I was to get a little out of formation, tempt the enemy drones to swarm me, then lead them back through the rest of the team. My friends could then eliminate the drones while they were focused on me.

It was a sound plan. And I’d make good on it . . . eventually.

Now, though, I wanted to test something.



I hit my overburn, accelerating away from the enemy ships. M-Bot was faster and more maneuverable than they were, though part of his big advantage had been in his ability to maneuver at high speed in air without ripping himself apart. Out here in a vacuum that wasn't a factor, and the enemy drones did a better job of keeping up.

They swarmed after me as I dove toward Detritus. My homeworld was protected by layers of ancient metal platforms—like shells—with gun emplacements all along them. After our victory six months ago, we'd pushed the Krell farther away from the planet, past the shells. Our current long-term strategy was to engage the enemy out here in space and keep them from getting close to the planet.

Keeping them out here had allowed our engineers—including my friend Rodge—to start gaining control of the platforms and their guns. Eventually, that shell of gun emplacements should protect our planet from incursions. For now though, most of those defensive platforms were still autonomous—and could be as dangerous for us as they were for the enemy.

The Krell ships swarmed in behind me, eager to cut me off from the battlefield—where my friends were engaging the rest of the drones in a massive brawl. That tactic of isolating me made one fatal assumption: that if I was alone, I'd be less dangerous.

"We're not going to turn back around and follow the plan, are we?" M-Bot asked. "You're going to try to fight them on your own."

I didn't respond.

"Jorgen is going to be aaaaaangry," M-Bot said. "By the way, those drones are trying to chase you along a specific heading, which I'm outlining on your monitor. My analysis projects that they've planned an ambush."

"Thanks," I said.

"Just trying to keep you from getting me blown up," M-Bot said. "By the way, if you *do* get us killed, be warned that I intend to haunt you."

"Haunt me?" I said. "You're a robot. And besides, I'd be dead too, right?"

"My robotic ghost would haunt your fleshy one."

"How would that even work?"

"Spensa, ghosts aren't real," he said in an exasperated tone. "Why are you worrying about things like that instead of flying? Honestly, humans get distracted so easily."

I spotted the ambush: a small group of Krell drones had hidden themselves by a large chunk of metal floating just out of range of the gun emplacements. As I drew close, the ambushing drones emerged and rocketed toward me. I was ready though. I let my arms relax, let my subconscious mind take over. I sank into myself, entering a kind of trance where I listened.

Just not with my ears.

Remote drones worked fine for the Krell in most situations. They were an expendable way to suppress the humans of Detritus. However, the enormous distances involved in space battle forced the Krell to rely on instantaneous faster-than-light communication to control their drones. I suspected their pilots were far away—but even if they were on the Krell station that hung out in space near Detritus, the lag of radio communications from there would make the drones too slow to react in battle. So, FTL was necessary.

That exposed one major flaw. I could hear their orders.

For some reason I didn't understand, I could *listen* into the place where FTL communication happened. I called it the nowhere, another dimension where our rules of physics didn't apply. I could hear into the place, occasionally see into it—and see the creatures that lived there watching me.

A single time, in the climactic battle six months ago, I'd managed to *enter* that place and teleport my ship a long distance in the blink of an eye. I still didn't know much about my powers. I hadn't been able to teleport again, but I'd been learning that whatever existed inside me, I could harness it and use it to fight.

I let my instincts take over, and sent my ship into a complex sequence of dodges. My battle-trained reflexes, melded with my innate ability to hear the drone orders, maneuvered my ship without specific conscious instructions on my part.

My cytonic ability had been passed down my family line. My ancestors had used it to move ancient starfleets around the galaxy. My father had had the ability, and the enemy had exploited it to get him killed. Now I used it to stay alive.

I reacted before the Krell did, responding to their orders—somehow, I processed them *even faster* than the drones could. By the time they attacked, I was already weaving through their destructor blasts. I darted

among them, then fired my IMP, bringing down the shields of everyone nearby.

In my state of focused concentration, I didn't care that the IMP took down my shield too. It didn't matter.

I launched my light-lance, and the rope of energy speared one of the enemy ships, connecting it to my own. I then used the difference in our momentum to spin us both around, which put me into position behind the pack of defenseless ships.

Blossoms of light and sparks broke the void as I destroyed two of the drones. The remaining Krell scattered like villagers before a wolf in one of Gran-Gran's stories. The ambush turned chaotic as I picked a pair of ships and gunned for them with destructors—blasting one away as a part of my mind tracked the orders being given to the others.

"I never fail to be amazed when you do that," M-Bot said quietly. "You're interpreting data faster than my projections. You seem almost . . . inhuman."

I gritted my teeth, bracing, and spun my ship, boosting it after a straggling Krell drone.

"I mean that as a compliment, by the way," M-Bot said. "Not that there's anything wrong with humans. I find their frail, emotionally unstable, irrational natures quite endearing."

I destroyed that drone and bathed my hull in the light of its fiery demise. Then I dodged right between the shots of two others. Though the Krell drones didn't have pilots on board, a part of me felt sorry for them as they tried to fight back against me—an unstoppable, unknowable force that did not play by the same rules that bound everything else they knew.

"Likely," M-Bot continued, "I regard humans as I do only because I'm programmed to do so. But hey, that's no different from instinct programming a mother bird to love the twisted, featherless abominations she spawns, right?"

*Inhuman.*

I wove and dodged, fired and destroyed. I wasn't perfect; I occasionally overcompensated and many of my shots missed. But I had a distinct edge.

The Superiority—and its minions the Krell—obviously knew to watch for people like me and my father. Their ships were always on the hunt for humans who flew too well or who responded too quickly. They'd tried

controlling my mind by exploiting a weakness in my talent—the same thing they’d done to my father. Fortunately, I had M-Bot. His advanced shielding was capable of filtering out their mental attacks while still allowing me to hear the enemy orders.

All of this raised a singular daunting question.

What *was* I?

“I would feel a lot more comfortable,” M-Bot said, “if you’d find a chance to reignite our shield.”

“No time,” I said. We’d need a good thirty seconds without flight controls to do that.

I had another chance to break toward the main battle, to follow through with the plan I’d outlined. Instead I spun, then hit the overburn and blasted back toward the enemy ships. My gravitational capacitors absorbed a large percentage of the g-forces and kept me from suffering too much whiplash, but I still felt pressure flattening me against my seat, making my skin pull back and my body feel heavy. Under extreme g-forces, I felt like I’d aged a hundred years in a second.

I pushed through it and fired at the remaining Krell drones. I strained my strange skills to their limits. A Krell destructor shot grazed the dome of my canopy, so bright it left an afterimage in my eyes.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “Both Jorgen and Cobb have called to complain. I know you said to keep them distracted, but—”

“Keep them distracted.”

“Resigned sigh.”

I looped us after an enemy ship. “Did you just *say* the words *resigned sigh*?”

“I find human nonlinguistic communications to be too easily misinterpreted,” he said. “So I’m experimenting with ways to make them more explicit.”

“Doesn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Obviously not. Dismissive eye-roll.”

Destructors flared around me, but I blasted two more drones. As I did, I saw something appear, reflected in the canopy of my cockpit. A handful of piercing white lights, like eyes, watching me. When I used my abilities too much, something looked out of the nowhere and saw me.

I didn't know what they were. I just called them the eyes. But I *could* feel a burning hatred from them. An anger. Somehow, this was all connected. My ability to see and hear into the nowhere, the eyes that watched me from that place, and the teleportation power I'd only managed to use once.

I could still distinctly remember how I'd felt when I'd used it. I'd been on the brink of death, being enveloped by a cataclysmic explosion. In that moment, somehow I'd activated something called a cytonic hyperdrive.

If I could master that ability to teleport, I could help free my people from Detritus. With that power, we could escape the Krell forever. And so I pushed myself.

Last time I'd jumped I'd been fighting for my life. If I could only recreate those same emotions . . .

I dove, my right hand on my control sphere, my left holding the throttle. Three drones swept in behind me, but I registered their shots and turned my ship at an angle so they all missed. I hit the throttle and my mind brushed the nowhere.

The eyes continued to appear, reflected in the canopy, as if it were revealing something that watched from behind my seat. White lights, like stars, but somehow more . . . aware. Dozens of malevolent glowing dots. In entering their realm, even slightly, I became visible to them.

Those eyes unnerved me. How could I be both fascinated by these powers and terrified of them at the same time? It was like the call of the void you felt when standing at the edge of a large cliff in the caverns, knowing you could just throw yourself off into that darkness. One step farther . . .

"Spensa!" M-Bot said. "New ship arriving!"

I pulled out of my trance, and the eyes vanished. M-Bot used the console display to highlight what he'd spotted. A new starfighter, almost invisible against the black sky, emerged from where the others had been hiding. Sleek, it was shaped like a disc and painted the same black as space. It was smaller than normal Krell ships, but it had a larger canopy.

These new black ships had only started appearing in the last eight months, in the days leading up to the attempt to bomb our base. Back then we hadn't realized what they meant, but now we knew.

I couldn't hear the commands this ship received—because none were being sent to it. Black ships like this one were not remote controlled. Instead, they carried real alien pilots. Usually an enemy ace—the best of their pilots.

The battle had just gotten far more interesting.

My heart leaped with excitement.

An enemy ace. Fighting drones was exciting, yes, but also lacking. It wasn't personal enough. A duel with an ace instead felt like the stories Gran-Gran told. Brave pilots engaging in grim contests on Old Earth during the days of the Great Wars. Person against person.

"I will sing to you," I whispered. "As your ship burns and your soul flees, I will sing. To the contest we had."

Dramatic, yes. My friends still tended to laugh at me when I said things like that, things like were said in the old stories. I'd mostly stopped. But I was still me, and I didn't say those things for my friends. I said them for myself.

And for the enemy I was about to kill.

The ace swooped toward me, firing destructors, trying to hit me while I was focused on the drones. I grinned, diving out of the way and spearing a chunk of space debris with my light-lance. That let me pivot quickly, while also swinging the debris behind me to block the shots. M-Bot's GravCaps absorbed most of the g-forces, but I still felt a tug pulling me downward as I swung through the arc, destructor fire blasting into the debris, one shot coming very near me. Scud. I still hadn't found a chance to reignite my shield.

"This might be a good time to head back and lead the enemy ships toward the others," M-Bot said. "Like the plan said . . ."

Instead, I noted the enemy ace overshooting me—then I swung around and gave chase.

"Dramatic trailing-off of speech," M-Bot added, "laden with implications of your irresponsible nature."

I fired at the ace, but they spun on their axis, cutting their boosters. Momentum carried them forward, although they'd turned back-to-front and

were now facing me. They couldn't steer well flying in reverse, so the maneuver was usually risky, but when you had a full shield and your enemy had none . . .

I was forced to break off the chase, boosting to the left and dodging out of the way of the destructor fire. I couldn't risk a head-on confrontation. Instead, I focused on the drones for a moment, blasting one out of the sky, then screamed through its debris—which scraped up M-Bot's wing and smacked the canopy with a fierce *crack*.

Right. No shield. And in space, the debris didn't fall after you shot the ship down. That felt like a rookie mistake—a reminder that despite all my training, I was new to zero-gravity combat.

The ace fell in behind me in an expert tailing maneuver. They were good, which was—on one hand—thrilling. On the other hand . . .

I tried to veer back toward the battle, but the drones swarmed in front of me, cutting me off. Maybe I was in a little over my head.

“Call Jorgen,” I said, “and tell him I might have let myself get cornered. I can't lead the enemy into our ambush; see if he and the others are willing to come help me instead.”

“Finally,” M-Bot said.

I dodged some more, tracking the enemy ace on my proximity monitor. Scud. I wished I could hear them like I could the drones.

*No, this is good, I thought. I need to be careful never to let my gift become a crutch.*

I gritted my teeth and made a snap decision. I couldn't get back to the main battle, so instead I dove toward Detritus. The defense shells surrounding it weren't solid; they were made up of large platforms that had housed living quarters, shipyards, and weapons. Though we'd begun reclaiming the ones closest to the planet, these outer layers were still set to automatically fire at anything that got close.

I hit my overburn, accelerating to speeds that—in atmosphere—would have caused most starfighters to rattle or even rip apart. Up here I only felt the acceleration, not the speed.

I quickly reached the nearest space platform. Long and thin, it curved slightly, like a chunk of broken eggshell. The remaining drones and the single ace were still on my tail. At these speeds, dogfighting was much more dangerous. The time for me to react before colliding with something



would be much smaller, and the smallest touch on my control sphere could veer me off course faster than I might be able to deal with.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said.

“I know what I’m doing,” I muttered back, concentrating.

“Yes, I’m sure,” M-Bot answered. “But . . . just in case . . . you *do* remember that we don’t have control of these outer platforms yet, right?”

I focused my full attention on sweeping down close to the surface of the metal platform without running into anything. The gun emplacements here tracked me and started firing—but they *also* started firing on the enemy.

I concentrated on dodging. Or really just weaving erratically—I could outfly the drones in a raw contest of skill, but they had superior numbers. Down near the platform, that translated into a liability for my enemies—because to the guns, we were all targets.

Several of the drones flared up in explosions—which vanished almost immediately, flames smothered by the vacuum of space.

“I wonder if those guns feel fulfilled, finally getting to shoot something down after all these years up here,” M-Bot said.

“Jealous?” I asked with a grunt, dodging.

“From what Rodge says, they don’t have true AIs, merely some simple targeting functions. So that would be like you being jealous of a rat.”

Another drone fell. *Just a little longer.* I wanted to even the odds a bit while I waited for my friends to arrive.

I sank into another trance as I flew. I couldn’t hear the controls of the gun emplacements, but in moments like these—moments of pure concentration—I felt as if I were becoming one with my ship.

I could feel the attention of the eyes back on me. My heart thundered inside my chest. With those guns trained on me . . . tails giving chase and still firing . . .

*A little further . . .*

My mind sank down, and I felt as if I could sense M-Bot’s very workings. I was in severe danger. I needed to escape.

Surely I could do it now. “Engage cytonic hyperdrive!” I said, then tried to do what I’d done once before, teleporting my ship.

“Cytonic hyperdrive is offline,” M-Bot said.

Scud. The one time it had worked, he’d been able to tell me it was online. I tried again, but . . . I didn’t even know what it was I’d done that

once. I had been in danger, about to die. And then I . . . I'd done . . .

Something?

A blast from a nearby gun nearly blinded me, and with gritted teeth I pulled up and zipped out of the defensive guns' range. The ace had survived, though they had taken a hit or two, so maybe their shield was weakened. Plus, only three drones remained.

I cut my thrust and spun my ship on its axis—still moving forward, but pointed backward—a maneuver that indicated I was going to try shooting behind me. Sure enough, the ace dodged away immediately. They weren't so brave with a weakened shield. Instead of firing, I boosted after the ace—escaping the drones, which swarmed toward my former position.

I got on the ace's tail and tried to draw in close enough for a shot—but whoever they were, they were *good*. They spun into a complex series of dodges, all while increasing speed. I misjudged a turn, and suddenly I swung out away from them. Quickly recovering, I matched their next turn and let out a blast of destructor fire—but now I was pretty far back and the shots went wild, vanishing into space.

M-Bot read off speeds and angles for me so I didn't have to break concentration for even the fraction of a second it would take to look at my control panel. I leaned forward, trying to match the other starfighter turn for turn—swooping, spinning, and boosting. Seeking that critical moment when we'd align just long enough for me to take a shot.

They, in turn, could twist at any moment and fire back—so they were likely watching for the same thing that I was, hoping to catch me off guard during a moment of alignment.

This perfect focus. This boiling intensity. This bizarre moment of connection where the alien pilot mirrored my efforts, striving, struggling, sweating—drawing closer and closer in a paradoxically *intimate* contest. For a flash we'd be as one. And then I'd kill them.

I lived for this challenge. For fighting against someone real and knowing it was either me or them. In moments like this, I didn't fight for the DDF or humankind. I fought to prove I could.

They swooped left just as I did. They spun and pointed toward me as we came into alignment briefly—and we both shot a burst at each other.

Their shots missed. Mine didn't. The first of my blasts broke their weakened shield. The second hit them just left of their cockpit, ripping the

dislike ship apart in a flash of light.

The vacuum consumed that eagerly, and I cut to the right, dodging the debris. I took deep breaths, struggling to slow my heart. Sweat soaked the pads on my helmet and leaked down the sides of my face.

“Spensa!” M-Bot shouted. “The drones!”

Scud.

I turned my ship and boosted to the side just as three flaring explosions lit my cockpit. I winced, but those lights weren’t the result of me getting shot—they were the lights of drones exploding one after another. Two DDF ships swooped past.

“Thanks, guys,” I said, tapping the group channel on the communications panel of my dash.

“No problem,” Kimmalyne replied over the channel. “As the Saint always said, ‘Watch out for the smart ones. They tend to be stupid.’” She had an accent and an unhurried way of speaking—somehow intrinsically upbeat, even when she was chastising me.

“I thought the idea was for you to distract the drones,” FM said, “then bring them back toward us.” She had a confident voice, the type that sounded like it should be coming from someone twice her age.

“I was planning to do it eventually.”

“Yeah,” FM said. “And that’s why you turned off your comm so Jorgen couldn’t yell at you?”

“It wasn’t off,” I said. “I just had M-Bot running interference.”

“Jorgen really hates talking to me!” M-Bot said enthusiastically. “I can tell by the way he says so!”

“Yeah, well, the enemy is retreating,” FM said. “And you’re lucky we were already on our way to help, even before you decided to admit you were in trouble.”

I was still something of a sweaty mess—heart racing, hands slick—as I reignited my shield, then turned my ship and flew toward the other two. The course took me past the wreckage of the ship I’d defeated, which was still moving along at roughly the same speed as when I’d hit it. That was space for you.

The ship had cracked apart rather than exploding completely, and so with a chill I was able to spot the corpse of the enemy ace. A boxy alien figure. Perhaps the armor it wore could protect it from the vacuum . . .

No. As I passed by, I saw that its armor had been broken apart in the blast. The actual creature inside was kind of like a small, two-legged crab—spindly and bright blue, with carapace along the abdomen and face. I had seen some of them piloting shuttles near their space station, which was farther out, monitoring Detritus from a distance. They were our jailers, and while the data we'd stolen called this crablike race the varvax, most of us still called them the Krell—even though we knew that was an acronym in some Superiority language for a phrase about keeping humans contained, not their actual race's name.

This one was truly dead. The liquid bath that filled its armor had spilled out into the void, first boiling explosively, then freezing into solid vapor. Space was weird.

I fixed my gaze on the body, slowing M-Bot, and hummed softly one of the songs of my ancestors. A Viking song for the dead.

*Well fought*, I thought to the Krell's departing soul. Nearby, some of our salvage ships came swooping in from where they'd watched the fight in relative safety nearer the planet. We always salvaged Krell ships, especially those that had been flown by living pilots. There was a chance we'd be able to capture a broken Superiority hyperdrive that way. They didn't travel using the minds of pilots. They had some kind of actual technology that let them travel between stars.

"Spin?" Kimmalyn called to me. "You coming?"

"Yeah," I said. I turned away and fell into line with her and FM. "M-Bot? How would you judge that pilot's flying abilities?"

"Somewhere near your own," M-Bot said. "And their ship was more advanced than any we'd faced before. I'll be honest, Spensa—mostly because I'm programmed to be incapable of lying—I think that fight could have gone either way."

I nodded, feeling much the same. I'd gone toe-to-toe with that ace. On one hand, it was a nice affirmation that my skill wasn't tied only to my abilities to touch the nowhere. But coming fully out of my trance now—feeling the odd sense of deflated purpose that always tailed a battle—I found myself strangely worried. In all our time fighting here, we'd seen only a handful of these black ships piloted by live beings.

If the Krell really wanted to kill us, why send so few aces? And . . . was this really the best they had? I was good, but I'd been flying for less than a

year. Our stolen information indicated that our enemies ran an enormous galactic coalition of hundreds of planets. Surely they had access to pilots who were better than I was.

Something struck me as off about all of this. The Krell used to only ever send a maximum of a hundred drones against us at once. They'd relaxed that, and now they would field upward of a hundred and twenty at once . . . but that still seemed a small number, considering the apparent size of their coalition.

So what was going on? Why were they still holding back?

Kimmalyn, FM, and I rejoined the rest of our fighters. The DDF was growing stronger and stronger. We'd lost only a single ship today, when in the past we'd lose half a dozen or more in each battle. And we were gaining momentum. In the last two months we'd begun deploying the first of our ships fabricated using technology learned from M-Bot. It had only been half a year since our casualties in the Battle of Alta Second, but the boost to our morale—and the fact that our pilots were surviving longer to hone their skills—was making us stronger by the day.

By intercepting the enemy out here, and not letting them get in close, we'd been able to expand our salvage operations. Because of this, we were not only reclaiming the closest of the defense platforms, but we were also able to scavenge materials for more and more ships.

All this meant shipbuilding and recruitment were both increasing dramatically. We'd soon have enough acclivity stone, and enough pilots, to field hundreds of starships.

Together, it was an ever-increasing snowball effect of progress. Still, a part of me worried. The Krell's behavior was odd. And beyond that, we had a huge disadvantage. They could travel the galaxy, while we were trapped on one planet.

Unless I learned how to use my powers.

"Um, Spensa?" M-Bot said. "Jorgen is calling, and I think he's annoyed."

I sighed, then hit the line. "Skyward Ten, reporting in."

"Are you all right?" he asked with a stern voice.

"Yeah."

"Good. We'll discuss this later." He cut the line.

I winced. He wasn't annoyed . . . he was *furious*.

Sadie—the new girl who had been assigned as my wingmate—flew up behind me in Skyward Nine. I sensed a nervousness to the posture of her ship, though perhaps I was reading too much into things. According to our plans, I'd left her behind when the Krell had sent an overwhelming force to destroy me. Fortunately, she'd had enough sense to follow orders and stay close to the others rather than tail me.

We had to wait for orders from Flight Command before flying back toward the planet, so we hovered in space for a short time. And as we did, Kimmalyn nudged her ship up beside mine. I glimpsed through her canopy into her cockpit. She always looked odd to me wearing her helmet, which covered her long dark hair.

"Hey," she said to me on a private line. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I said. It was a lie. Every time I used my strange abilities, I felt a conflict inside me. Our ancestors had been afraid of people like me, people with cytonic powers. Before we'd crashed on Detritus, we'd worked in the ships' engine rooms, powering and guiding our travel.

They'd just called us the people of the engines. Other crew members had shunned us—instilling in our culture traditions and prejudices that had lasted even after we'd forgotten what a cytonic was.

Could it all be just superstition, or was there more to it? I had felt the malevolence of the eyes. In the end, my father had attacked his own kind. We blamed the Krell for that, but I worried. He'd seemed so angry on the tapes.

I worried that whatever I was, my actions would bring more danger than any of us understood.

"Guys?" Sadie asked, pulling her ship up alongside mine. "What does this warning on my console mean?"

I glanced at the flashing light on the proximity monitor, then cursed under my breath and scanned out into the void. I could just barely see the Krell monitoring station out there, and as I watched, something new appeared next to it. Two objects that were even larger than it was.

Capital ships. "Two new ships just arrived in the system," M-Bot said. "My long-range sensors confirm what Flight Command is seeing. They appear to be battleships."

"Scud," FM said over the line. So far, we'd faced only other fighters—but we knew from stolen intel that the enemy had access to at least a few

large-scale capital ships like these.

“We have limited data on the armaments of ships like those,” M-Bot said. “The intel you and I stole contained only generalized information. But my processors say those ships are likely equipped to bombard the planet.”

Bombard. They could launch ordnance on the planet from outer space, hitting it with enough firepower to turn even those living in deep caverns to dust.

“They won’t be able to get past the defensive platforms,” I said. That was, we assumed, why the Krell had always used low-altitude bombers in the past, not orbital bombardment. The planet’s platforms had been built with countermeasures to prevent bombardment from a distance.

“And if they just destroy the platforms first?” Sadie said.

“The defenses are too strong for that,” I said.

It was bravado, in part. We didn’t know for sure if Detritus’s defenses could prevent a bombardment. Perhaps once we gained control of them all, we’d be able to determine their full capabilities. We were months away from that, unfortunately.

“Do you hear anything?” Kimmalyln said.

I reached out with my cytonic senses. “Just a faint, soft music,” I said. “Almost like static, but . . . prettier. I’d have to get closer to understand any specifics of what they’re saying.”

I’d always been able to hear the sounds coming from the stars. I’d first thought of it as music when I was younger. During my months of training, and talking to my grandmother, we’d determined that “music” to be the sound of FTL communications being sent through the nowhere. Likely, what I heard now was the sound of that station or those battleships communicating with the rest of the Superiority.

We waited for a long time, orders saying for us to hold position to see if those battleships advanced. They didn’t. It seemed that whatever they’d been sent to do, it wouldn’t happen in the immediate future.

“Orders are in,” Jorgen eventually said over the comm. “Those battleships are settling in, so we’re to report back at Platform Prime. Come on.”

I sighed, then turned my ship around and headed toward the planet. I’d survived the battle.

Now it was time to go get yelled at.

**M**-Bot calculated our approach.

The others still weren't completely comfortable with him. A computer program that could think and talk like a person? Gran-Gran—who had been a little girl during the days before our people had crashed on Detritus—said she'd heard of such things, but they had been forbidden.

Still, M-Bot provided an advantage we couldn't ignore. With his hyperefficient calculations, we could easily navigate a path through the defensive platforms surrounding Detritus without the aid of DDF mathematicians.

We carefully maintained the course he indicated, passing just outside the range of the gun emplacements on metal platforms the size of mountain ranges. I noted the shadows of skyscrapers. During my schooling, I'd taken mandatory heritage classes each year—where we'd seen pictures of Old Earth, and had been taken to see animals of many varieties in special caverns where they were bred. So I knew about life there, and about things like skyscrapers, even if I'd always found Gran-Gran's stories of the ancient times more interesting than the heritage classes.

Those skyscrapers indicated that these platforms around Detritus had been inhabited once, like the planet had been, but something had destroyed them centuries ago.

The sight of all the platforms—curving into what seemed like infinity—never failed to leave me breathless. Our fifty starfighters were specks of dust by comparison. How long had it taken to build all of this? There were maybe a hundred thousand people living in the cave networks that made up our nation, the Defiant Caverns. But that entire population could vanish into just one of these platforms.

The command came to decelerate. I spun M-Bot with the others and pointed my boosters toward the planet. A quiet, easy burn slowed my ship.



Facing backward toward the shells, it all looked faintly like the gears of some eldritch clock going about an unknowable purpose. Each platform rotating in its turn, guns ready to vaporize anyone—human or alien—who tried to interfere. These shells were the reason we were still alive though, so I wasn't complaining.

Our ships soon passed the nearest shell to the planet, which was distinctive for several reasons. The most obvious was that it held thousands of massive lights that shone like spotlights, illuminating sections of the planet below. These skylights created an artificial day/night cycle.

This inner shell was also in a far worse state of repair than the outer ones. Enormous fields of debris tumbled through space here just outside the atmosphere. This junk was the remnants of—we assumed—platforms that had been destroyed. Some sections had fallen inward, crashing into the planet after losing power.

A voice crackled in my helmet speaker. "Skyward Flight," a man's voice said, "and Xiwang Flight. Admiral Cobb has ordered you to dock on Platform Prime. The rest of you, head down to the surface for off-shift rotation."

I recognized the speaker as Rikolfr, a member of the admiral's staff. I complied, turning my ship in the right direction. That brought Detritus into my view: a blue-grey sphere with a bright, inviting atmosphere. Thirty ships from our fleet flew off down toward the planet.

The rest of us skimmed along outside the atmosphere, passing several platforms whose lights blinked a friendly blue, instead of the angry red of the other platforms. Thanks to M-Bot's stealth capabilities, we'd been able to land on one and hack its systems. Fortunately, the platforms' internal security protocols made some small exceptions for humans, which had given the engineers a brief respite—long enough to finish their work.

That done, Rodge and the other engineers had figured out how to power down a few of the platforms nearby, letting us reclaim those too. Our work had captured only ten out of thousands so far, but it was a promising start.

Platform Prime was the largest of these—an enormous platform with docking bays for starfighters. We'd turned it into an orbital headquarters, though the engineering teams were still working on some of its systems—most notably the ancient data banks.

I flew into my assigned dock, a small individual hangar. The lights flickered on as the bay door closed, and the room pressurized. I drew in a deep breath and sighed, then opened the canopy. It felt so dull to return after a battle and go back to ordinary life. Unrealistic though it was, I wished that I could continue patrolling and flying. The answers to who I was—to *what* I was—were out there somewhere, not in these sterile metallic hallways.

“Hey!” M-Bot said as I climbed out of the cockpit. “Take me with you. I don’t want to miss the fun.”

“I’m just going to get a lecture.”

“Like I said . . . ,” he replied.

Fine. I reached back under the front control panel and unhooked his new mobile receptor: a bracelet device that contained some sensory equipment, a holographic projector, a receiver to boost M-Bot’s communication capabilities, and a small clock display. He claimed to have had a mobile receptor like it in the past, but it was missing—his old pilot had probably taken it hundreds of years ago when he’d gone out to explore Detritus.

When M-Bot had given the engineers plans to create a new one, they’d gone crazy over the microhologram technology it contained. Fortunately, they’d stopped celebrating long enough to fabricate me a replacement. I’d taken to wearing this rather than my father’s light-line, as I rarely found chances to use that now that I wasn’t exploring caverns regularly.

I snapped on the hologram bracelet, then handed my helmet to Dobsi—one of the ground crew members—as she climbed up the ladder outside to check on me.

“Anything we should look at?” she asked.

“I took a chunk of debris on the right side of the fuselage with my shield down.”

“I’ll check it out.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And fair warning: he’s in one of his moods.”

“Is he ever not?”

“There was this one time,” I said, “when he was processing a self-diagnostic, and didn’t say anything for a whole five minutes. It was pure bliss.”

“You know,” M-Bot said, “that I’m programmed to be able to recognize sarcasm, right?”

“The joke would be wasted if you weren’t.” I entered the changing room, which doubled as my bunk up here—not that I owned a lot. My father’s pin, my old maps of the caverns, and a few of my improvised weapons. I kept them in one trunk beside the cot, with my changes of clothing.

As soon as I entered, a fluting trill greeted me. Doomslug sat on her perch beside the door. Bright yellow, with little blue spikes along her back, she was snuggled into some of my old shirts, which she’d made into a nest. I scratched her on the head, and she gave another joyful fluting sound. She wasn’t slimy, but rather tough, like the feel of good leather.

I was glad to see her here; she was supposed to stay in my bunk room, but kept slipping away somehow, and I’d often find her in the hangar. She seemed to like being near M-Bot.

I washed up, but didn’t change out of my flight suit. Then, having wasted as much time as I could justify, I steeled myself with a warrior’s determination and stepped out into the hallway. The light here was always too bright after being out in space—the white walls shiny and reflective. The only part that wasn’t overly polished or lit was the carpet down the center, which had aged remarkably well—likely because this had all been a vacuum until the engineering team had patched the station’s holes and turned on the life support systems.

In the hallway waited the other members of my flight. Nedd and Arturo were arguing about whether or not pilots should be allowed to paint designs on the fronts of their ships. I ignored them and stepped up beside Kimmalyn, whose hair was messy now that she held her helmet under her arm.

“You *do* realize how mad Jorgen is,” she whispered to me.

“I can handle him,” I said.

Kimmalyn raised an eyebrow.

“Really,” I said. “I just have to be properly confident and intimidating. Got any eye black handy?”

“Uh, what’s that?”

“A kind of war paint used by the men who fought on the gridiron on Old Earth. A type of deathmatch involving a dead pig.”

“Neat. But I’m fresh out. And . . . Spin, wouldn’t it be better to *not* aggravate Jorgen? For once?”

“Not sure I’m capable of that.”

FM walked past, giving me an encouraging thumbs-up. I returned it, though I still felt awkward around her sometimes. The tall, slender woman somehow managed to wear even a flight suit in a fashionable way, while the bulky clothing always made me feel like I had on three layers too many. She joined T-Stall and Catnip, a pair of guys who had been added to our flight to fill in holes. They were in their early twenties, older than the rest of us by a few years, though they were doing their best to integrate.

Aside from Jorgen, the only other member of our team was Sadie, the new girl. She promptly tripped over the small ledge on the ground between her changing room and the hallway, nearly dropping her helmet. Her blue hair and distinctive features reminded me of . . . well, painful memories.

Most of the others continued on down the hall toward the mess, but I waited around for Jorgen—better to confront him now, though he was usually last out of his ship, as he went through the postflight checklist every time, in detail, even though it was okay to let the ground crew do it. Kimmalyn waited with me, and Sadie hurried over to us.

“You were *so* amazing out there,” she said, clutching her helmet to her chest as she beamed. Scud. We were only one class ahead of her group, so were basically the same age. But surely we didn’t look nearly as young as she did.

“Yeah, well, nice flying today yourself,” I said.

“You were *watching*?”

I hadn’t been watching, but I nodded to her encouragingly.

“Maybe soon I’ll be able to be like you, Spin!”

“You did wonderfully, dear,” Kimmalyn said, patting Sadie on the shoulder. “But never try to be who you aren’t; you don’t have nearly enough practice to pull it off.”

“Right, right,” Sadie said, digging in her pocket and pulling out a little notepad and a pencil. “Never . . . who you aren’t . . .” She scribbled down the saying as if it were scripture, though I was sure Kimmalyn had made it up on the spot.

I glanced at Kimmalyn. Her serene expressions were famously hard to read, but the twinkle in her eyes revealed she loved the idea of someone recording her sayings.

“I wish I could have followed you today, Spin. It looked dangerous for you to be alone.”

“The only thing I want you to follow, Sadie,” a firm voice said, “is your orders. If only others were so inclined.”

I didn’t have to look to know that Jorgen—flightleader, and sometimes Jerkface—had finally joined us, and was standing behind me.

“Um, thank you, sir,” Sadie said, then saluted and scampered off toward the mess.

“Good luck,” Kimmalyn whispered to me, squeezing my arm. “May you only get what you deserve.” Then, of course, she abandoned me.

Well, I could slay this beast on my own. I turned around, chin up—then had to tip my head back a little farther. Why did he have to be so scudding tall? Jorgen Weight, with his deep brown skin, was a pillar of exquisite, rule-following determination. He went to bed each night with the DDF Code of Conduct tucked under his pillow, he ate his breakfast while listening to patriotic speeches, and he exclusively used silverware that had the words *Don’t let Spensa have any fun* stenciled on the handles.

I might have made a few of those things up. Regardless, it *did* seem that he spent far too much of his life complaining about me. Well, I’d grown up around bullies. I knew how to stand up for myself against someone who—

“Spensa,” he said to me, “you need to stop being such a bully.”

“Ooooooh,” M-Bot’s voice said from my wrist. “Nice.”

“Shut up,” I muttered to him. “Bully? *Bully?*” I poked Jorgen in the chest. “What do you mean, bully?”

He eyed my finger.

“I can’t bully you,” I said. “You’re taller than I am.”

“That is *not* how it works, Spensa,” Jorgen growled, his voice growing lower. “And . . . what are you wearing on your face?”

On my face? It was such a non sequitur that I momentarily forgot the argument with Jorgen, glancing instead at the polished metallic wall to see my reflection. My face was painted with black lines under my eyes. What?

“Eye black,” M-Bot said from my wrist. “Paint worn by athletes on Old Earth. You said to Kimmalyn that—”

“That was a joke,” I said. The skin paint was a hologram M-Bot had projected onto me by his mobile receptor. “You really need to have someone rewrite your humor program, M-Bot.”

“Oooohhhh,” he said. “Sorry.” He made the hologram vanish.

Jorgen shook his head, then brushed past me and stalked down the hallway, leaving me to hurry to catch up.

“You’ve always been independent, Spin, I get that,” he said. “But now you’re using your powers and your status to shove everyone else—including Cobb—around. You’re ignoring protocol and orders because you know there’s not a scudding thing the rest of us can do about it. Those are the actions of a bully.”

“I’m trying to protect the others,” I said. “I’m drawing away the enemy! I’m becoming a target!”

“The plan was for you to do that, then lead them back toward us so we could attack them from the sides. I noted several chances where you could have done this, and you specifically chose to double down on fighting them by yourself.” He eyed me. “You’re trying to prove something. What is wrong with you lately? You were always eager to work as part of the team before. Scud, you practically *forged* this team. Now you act like this? Like you’re the only one who matters?”

I . . .

My objections faded away. Because I knew he was right, and I knew that making excuses here would be fighting with the wrong weapon. There was only one that ever really worked with Jorgen. The truth.

“They’re determined to kill me, Jorgen,” I said. “They *will* throw everything they have at us until I’m dead.”

We stopped at the end of the hall, beneath a blaring white light.

“You know it’s true,” I said, meeting his eyes. “They’ve figured out what I am. If they destroy me, then they can trap us on Detritus forever. They will cut through *anyone* to get to me.”

“So you make it easier for them?”

“I’m distracting them, like I said, so that . . .” The words died on my lips. Scudding Jerkface and his intensely knowing eyes. “Okay, fine. I’m trying to push myself. The one time I did it, the one time I hyperjumped, I was in the middle of an explosion. I was desperate, threatened, about to die. So I figure if I can re-create that emotion, I might be able to do it again. I might be able to figure out what it is I can do, what it is . . . that I really am.”

He sighed, looking up toward the ceiling with what seemed to me a melodramatic expression. “Saints help us,” he muttered. “Spin, that’s crazy.”

“It’s bold,” I said. “A warrior always tests herself. Pushes herself. Seeks the limits of her skills.”

He eyed me, but I held my ground. Jorgen had a way of making me vocalize the things I didn’t normally acknowledge, not even to myself. Maybe that made him a good flightleader. Scud, the fact that he could kind-of-somewhat handle me was proof enough of that.

“Spensa,” he said. “You’re the best thing we have. You’re vital to the DDF . . . and to me.”

I was suddenly aware of how close he was standing. He leaned down just a little, and for a moment seemed like he wanted to go further. Unfortunately, there was something blocking us at the same time, interfering with whatever we might have been able to have. For one, the flightleader-pilot relationship was awkward.

There was more than that though. He was the embodiment of order, and I . . . well, I wasn’t. I didn’t know *what* or who I really was. When I was honest with myself, I had to admit that was why I hadn’t moved forward with him these past six months.

Jorgen eventually leaned away. “You know the National Assembly has been talking about how you’re too important to risk in battle. How they want to keep you back.”

“I’d like to see them try,” I said, angry at the thought.

“Part of me would too,” he said, then smiled fondly. “But really, do we need to give them ammunition? You’re part of a team. *We* are part of a team. Don’t start thinking you have to do things alone, Spensa. Please. And for the stars’ sake, *stop* trying to put yourself in danger. We’ll find another way.”

I nodded, but . . . it was easy for him to say things like that. Gran-Gran said that even when our ancestors had been part of a space fleet together, people like me had been feared.

The people of the engines. The hyperdrives. We were strange. Maybe even inhuman.

Jorgen keyed his code into the doorway at the end of the hall, but before he finished, the door opened. Kimmalyn had activated it from the other side. “Guys,” she said, breathless. “*Guys.*”

I frowned. She wasn’t normally this excitable. “What?”

“Rodge sent me word,” she said. “The engineers working on the platform’s computer systems? They just found something. *A recording.*”



Jorgen and I followed Kimmalyn to the room everyone was calling the library, despite the lack of books. Here, the Engineering Corps had been working full-time on the old data banks. They'd ripped out several of the wall panels, exposing the networks of wires running inside like tendons. Though much of this platform had come online with minimal fuss, we had been locked out of several computer systems.

Kimmalyn led us to a group of engineers in ground crew jumpsuits whispering and chatting excitedly, gathered around a large monitor they'd set up. I looked around for the rest of my flight, but they weren't here—it was just me, Jorgen, Kimmalyn, and some officers from the admiral's staff. I tugged at my bulky flight suit, which was sweaty from my time fighting. "Wish I'd decided to change," I muttered to Jorgen.

"I could create a hologram of a new outfit for you!" M-Bot offered. "It \_\_\_"

"How would that change the fact that I feel sweaty?" I asked him. Seriously, now that we had the remote bracelet and hologram working, he was just looking for any excuse he could get to show off.

At my voice though, someone perked up from the crowd of engineers. He turned, then grinned when he saw us.

Rodge was lanky and pale, with a mop of red hair. He smiled more now than he had when we were growing up. In fact, I kept feeling like I'd missed something—somehow, during our time repairing M-Bot together, someone had snatched away my nervous friend and replaced him with this confident person.

I was proud of him, particularly when I noticed he'd gone back to wearing his cadet's pin—one that Cobb had specifically ordered to be enameled red for him, a new symbol of achievement reserved for outstanding members of the engineering or ground crews.

Rodge bounced over to us, speaking in a soft voice. “I’m so happy she found you. You’re going to want to see this.”

“What is it?” Jorgen asked, craning his neck to see the monitor.

“Last station records,” Rodge whispered. “The final video logs before this place was shut down. They were interrupted midrecording, and the encryption process didn’t finish as they were archived. It’s the first good chunk of data we’ve been able to recover.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Commander Ulan insisted we wait for Cobb before showing it, and I figured nobody would complain if the Hero of Alta Second wanted to watch.”

Indeed, my arrival had drawn some attention. A couple of the engineers nudged one another, nodding toward me.

“You know, Spin,” Kimmalyn noted from my side, “it can be rather convenient to be around you. Everyone pays so much attention to you, the rest of us can get away with whatever we want.”

“What would *you* want to get away with?” Jorgen asked. “Taking an extra sip of tea?”

Since he was still trying to get a glimpse of the monitor, he didn’t notice Kimmalyn giving him a shockingly rude gesture. I gaped at her, my jaw dropping. Had she really just done that?

Kimmalyn shot me a mischievous smile, which she then covered with her hand. This girl . . . I thought I had her figured out, then she did something like that, deliberately intended—I was sure—to shock me.

Further conversation was interrupted as the door opened and Cobb entered. He wore a short white beard and still walked with a limp from his old wound—but refused to use a cane except in the most formal of situations. He carried a steaming mug of coffee in one hand, and was wearing the crisp white uniform of the Defiant Defense Force Admiral of the Fleet—the right breast bedecked with ribbons of merit and rank.

He’d reluctantly stepped up to the position after Ironsides—with equal reluctance—had taken her retirement. By some metrics, Cobb was the most important living human being. And yet, he was still just . . . well, Cobb.

“What’s this about a log file?” he demanded. “What’s on the blasted thing?”

“Sir!” said Commander Ulan, a tall woman of Yeongian heritage. “We don’t know yet. We wanted to wait for you.”

“What?” Cobb said. “Don’t you know how slowly I walk? Damn station could rotate through three shifts in the time it takes for me to limp across the stupid thing.”

“Er. Sir. We thought . . . I mean, nobody believes your leg makes you slow . . . er . . . not too slow, I mean . . .”

“Don’t pander to me, Commander,” he snapped.

“We just wanted to be respectful.”

“Don’t respect me either,” he grumbled, then took a sip of his coffee. “Makes me feel old.”

Ulan forced a laugh, at which Cobb scowled, making Ulan look even *more* uncomfortable. I empathized with her. Learning how to deal with Cobb was as specialized a skill as performing a triple Ahlstrom loop with a reverse jumpback.

The techs made way for Cobb, so Kimmalyne and I took the opportunity to slip closer to the screen. Jorgen hung back, standing with his hands clasped behind him and letting higher-ranking officers take the closer positions. Sometimes that boy could be too dutiful. Almost made a girl feel bad for using her notoriety to get a good spot.

Cobb eyed me. “I hear you’re pulling stunts again, Lieutenant,” he said softly as one of the senior technicians fiddled with the files.

“Um . . . ,” I said.

“She sure is!” M-Bot’s voice at my wrist said. “She told Jorgen she was intentionally trying to—” I hit the mute. Then, just to be careful, I turned off his holographic projector too. I blushed, looking at Cobb.

The admiral sipped his coffee. “We’ll talk later. I don’t want to anger your grandmother by getting you killed. She made me a pie last week.”

“Um, yes, sir.”

The screen fuzzed and then the video opened, showing an image of this very room—only without the walls torn apart. A group of people sat busy before monitors, wearing unfamiliar uniforms. My breath caught. They were human.

We’d always known that would be the case. Though we’d found Detritus uninhabited, Old Earth languages decorated much of the machinery. Still, it was eerie to be looking back in time at these mysterious people. Millions upon millions—if not billions—of them must have inhabited the planet and these platforms. How had they all vanished?

They seemed to be talking—indeed, they seemed agitated, bustling around the room. On closer inspection, it looked like several were screaming, but the picture didn't have sound. A man with blond hair scrambled into the seat in front of this monitor, his face filling our screen. He started talking.

"Sorry, sir!" said one of the techs near me. "We're working on audio. Just a sec . . ."

Sound suddenly erupted from the screen. People shouting, a dozen voices overlapping. "—make this report," the man at the screen said, speaking in heavily accented English. "We have initial evidence that the planet's cytosields are, despite long-standing assumptions, *insufficient*. The delver has heard our communications, and followed them to us. Repeat, the delver has returned to our station and . . ."

He trailed off, looking over his shoulder. The room was mass chaos, some people breaking down and collapsing to the floor in hysterics, others screaming at one another.

The man on our screen typed on his keyboard. "We have video from one of the perimeter platforms," he said. "Number 1132. Turning to that view now."

I leaned forward as the recording switched to show a starfield—the view from a camera on the outer shell, looking out into space. I could see the curvature of the platform on the bottom of the screen.

The people in the recording quieted. Were they seeing something in that star-speckled blackness that I wasn't? Was it—

More stars were appearing.

They winked into existence, like pinpricks in reality. Hundreds . . . thousands of them, too bright to actually be stars. In fact, they moved in the sky, gathering and collecting. Even through the monitor—even from a vast distance away, in both time and space—I could *feel* their malevolence.

These weren't stars. These were the eyes.

My lungs seized up. My heart started to pound in my chest. More and more of the lights appeared, watching me through the screen. They knew me. They could *see* me.

I started to panic. But beside me, Cobb continued to quietly sip his coffee. Somehow, the calm way he stood there helped fend off my anxiety.

*This happened a long time ago, I reminded myself. There's no danger to me now.*

The lights on the screen started to grow blurry . . . Dust, I realized. A cloud of it appeared, as if leaking through punctures in reality. The dust glowed with white light and expanded at an incredible speed. Then something followed, a large circular shape that emerged as if from nothing in the center of the dust cloud.

It was hard to make out more than the shadow of the thing. At first, my mind refused to accept the awesome scale it presented. The thing that had appeared—that blackness inside the glowing dust—dwarfed the enormous platform. Scuuud. Whatever it was, it was the size of a planet.

“I have . . . I have visual confirmation of a delver,” said the man recording the video. “Mother of Saints . . . It’s here. The cytosielding project is a failure. The delver turned back and . . . and it’s come for us.”

The black mass shifted toward the planet. Were those arms I picked out in the shadows? No, could they be spines? The shape seemed intentionally designed to frustrate the mind, as I tried—against reason—to make sense of what I was seeing. Soon, the blackness simply became absolute. The camera died.

I thought the video was over, but the view switched back to the library room, where the man sat at his desk. Most of the other monitors had been abandoned, leaving only the man and one woman. I heard screams from elsewhere in the platform as this one man, trembling, stood up—knocking into the monitor he’d been using, twisting the camera angle.

“Life signs vanishing from the outer defensive rings!” shouted the woman. She stood up at her desk. “Platforms falling dormant. The High Command has ordered us to engage autonomous mode!”

Shaking visibly, the man sat back down. We watched through an off-kilter monitor as he typed furiously. The woman in the room pushed back from her desk, then looked up at the ceiling as a low sound rumbled through the platform.

“Autonomous defenses engaged . . . ,” the man muttered, still typing. “Escape ships are falling dead. Saints . . .”

The room shook again, and the lights flickered.

“The planet is firing on us!” the woman screamed. “Our own people are *firing on us!*”

“They’re not firing at us,” the man continued, typing as if in a daze. “They’re firing on the delver as it envelops the planet. We’re just in the way. We need to make sure the nowalk is closed . . . Can’t access it from here, but maybe . . .”

He continued to mutter, but my attention was drawn by something else. Lights gathering at the back of the room on the screen. They were breaking reality, making the far wall seem to stretch, become an infinite starfield penetrated by intense, hateful pinpricks.

The eyes had arrived. The woman in the room screamed, then . . . vanished. She seemed to twist in on herself, then shrink, crushed by some invisible force. The remaining man, the one who had been speaking, continued furiously typing at his station, his eyes wide. A madman working as if on his last will and testament. Though his face dominated the screen, I could see the blackness gathering behind him.

Lit by stars that were not stars.

Infinity coalescing.

A shape stepped from the darkness.

And it looked just like me.

I stumbled back from the screen, colliding with the press of officers. I was suddenly fully alert like I felt before a battle, and I found my hands forming fists. If they wouldn't let me out, I would *punch* my way to—

“Spensa?” Kimmalyn said, taking me by the arm. “Spensa!”

I blinked, then looked around, sweating, wide-eyed. “How?” I demanded. “How did it . . .” I looked back at the screen, which had paused on the image of the dead man and his room filled with stars. The line at the bottom indicated the video had reached its end.

The freeze-frame had a complete shot of me standing behind him. I was there. *I WAS THERE*. Wearing my modern DDF flight suit. Same shoulder-length brown hair and narrow face. I was frozen in place, reaching toward the man.

My expression though . . . I looked terrified. Then that expression changed, impossibly mimicking how I now felt.

“Turn it off!” I shouted. I reached for the screen, pulling out of Kimmalyn's grip, though a stronger grip seized me.

I wrestled against those hands, struggling to get to the screen. Both with my body, and . . . and with something else. Some sense inside me. Some primal, panicked, horrified piece of me. It was like a silent scream that emerged from within and expanded outward.

Then, from someplace distant, I felt as if something responded to my scream.

*I . . . hear . . . you . . .*

“Spensa!” Jorgen said.

I looked up at him. He was holding me back, his eyes locked on mine.

“Spensa, what do you see?” he said.

I glanced at the screen and my image there. Wrong, so wrong. My face. My emotions. And . . .

“You don’t see it?” I asked, looking around at the others and their confused expressions.

“The darkness?” Jorgen asked. “There’s a man on the screen, the one who was making the log. Then there’s a blackness behind him, broken by white lights.”

“Like . . . eyes . . . ,” one of the techs said.

“And the person?” I asked. “Don’t you see someone in the darkness?”

My question was met by more confused stares.

“It’s just blackness,” Rodge said from the side of the group. “Spin? There’s nothing else there. I don’t even see any stars.”

“I see stars,” Jorgen said, narrowing his eyes. “And something that might be a shape. Maybe. Mostly just a shadow.”

“Turn it off,” Cobb said. “See what other logs or files you can dig out.” He looked at me. “I’ll speak with Lieutenant Nightshade in private.”

I looked from him to the room’s startled faces, feeling a sudden shame. I’d worked through my worries about being viewed as a coward, but it was still embarrassing to have made such a scene. What did they think, seeing me break like that?

I forced myself to calm down and nodded to Jorgen, prying myself from his grip. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just got a little caught up in the video.”

“Great. We’re still going to talk later,” Jorgen said.

Cobb waved for me to follow him out of the room, and I made my way to the door, though just before we left he paused and looked back in. “Lieutenant McCaffrey?” he asked.

“Sir?” Rodge said, perking up from beside the wall.

“You still working on that project of yours?”

“Yes, sir!” Rodge said.

“Good. Go see if your theories work. I’ll talk to you later.” He continued on, leading me out of the room.

“What was that about, sir?” I asked him as the door shut behind us.

“That’s not important now,” he said, leading me into the observatory across the hall. A wide, shallow room, the observatory was named for its dramatic view of the planet below. I stepped inside, and through the wall-to-wall window Detritus confronted me.

Cobb stood at the window and took a sip of coffee. I approached, trying to keep the trepidation from showing in my steps. I couldn’t help but glance



over my shoulder toward the room where we had watched the video.

“What did you see in that video?” Cobb asked.

“Myself,” I said. I could speak honestly to Cobb. He’d long since proven he deserved my trust, and more. “I know it sounds impossible, Cobb, but the darkness in the video took shape, and it was me.”

“I once watched my best friend and wingmate try to kill me, Spensa,” he said softly. “We now know something had overwritten what he saw—or the way his brain interpreted what he saw—so he mistook me for the enemy.”

“You think . . . this is similar?”

“I have no other explanation as to why you’d see yourself in a video archive hundreds of years old.” He took a long drink of his coffee, tipping the cup back to get the last drops. Then he lowered it. “We’re blind here. We don’t know what the enemy is capable of—or really even who the enemy *are*. You see anything else in that darkness?”

“I thought I heard something tell me . . . that it ‘heard’ me. But that felt different somehow. From a different place, and not nearly as angry. I don’t know how to explain it.”

Cobb grunted. “Well, at least now we have an idea what happened to the people of this planet.” He gestured with his mug out the window, and I stepped up to look down at Detritus. It looked desolate, a surface that had been turned to slag. The debris in lower orbit—the damaged platforms, the junk—had probably been caused by terrified people on the planet firing on the entity as it surrounded them.

“Whatever that thing was in the recording,” Cobb said, “it came here and . . . destroyed all the people on this planet and these platforms. They called it a delver.”

“Have you ever heard of anything like that?” I asked. “You knew about . . . about the eyes I sometimes see.”

“Not the word *delver*,” Cobb said. “But we have traditions that stretch back from before our grandparents were alive. They speak of beings that watch us from the void, the deep darkness, and they warn us to avoid communicating wirelessly. That’s why we only use radio for important military channels. That man on the video said that the delver came because it heard their communications, so maybe that’s related.” Cobb eyed me. “We’re warned not to create machines that can think too quickly and . . .”

“And we’re supposed to fear people who can see into the nowhere,” I whispered. “Because they draw the attention of the eyes.”

Cobb didn’t contradict me. He went for another sip of coffee, but found his mug empty and grunted softly.

“Do you think that the thing we saw in that video is related to the eyes you see?” Cobb asked.

I swallowed. “Yes,” I said. “They’re the same, Cobb. The entities that watch when I use my powers are the same as that thing with the spines that emerged on the video. The man said something about their cytonshield. That sounds a lot like cytonics.”

“A shield to keep the enemy from hearing or finding the cytonics on the planet, maybe,” Cobb said. “And it failed.” He sighed, shaking his head. “You see those battleships arrive earlier?”

“Yeah. But the platforms will protect us from bombardment, right?”

“Maybe,” Cobb said. “Some of these systems still work, but others aren’t as reliable. Our engineers think some of those more distant platforms have anti-bombardment countermeasures, but we can’t know for certain. I’m not sure we have the luxury of worrying about delvers, or the eyes, or any of that. We have a more immediate problem. The Krell—or whatever they’re really called—won’t listen to our pleas to stop their attacks. They’ve stopped caring whether they preserve any humans. They’re determined to exterminate us.”

“They’re afraid of us,” I said. When M-Bot and I had stolen information off their station six months ago, that was the biggest and most surprising revelation I’d discovered about the Krell. They kept us contained not out of spite, but because they were genuinely terrified of humankind.

“Afraid of us or not,” Cobb said, “they want us dead. And unless we can find a way to travel the stars like they do, we’re doomed. No fortress—no matter how powerful—can stand forever, particularly not against an enemy as strong as the Superiority.”

I nodded. It was a core tenet of battlefield tactics: you needed to have a plan of retreat. As long as we were trapped on Detritus, we were in danger. If we could get offworld, all kinds of options opened to us. Fleeing and hiding somewhere else. Searching for other human enclaves—if they existed—and recruiting help. Striking back against the enemy, putting them on the defensive.

None of this was possible until I learned to use my powers. Or, barring that, until we found a way to steal the enemy's hyperdrive technology. Cobb was right. The eyes, the delvers, they might be important to me—but in the grand scheme of my people's survival, that was all a secondary problem.

We *needed* to find a way off this planet.

Cobb looked at me carefully. He had always felt old. I knew that he was only a few years older than my parents, yet right now he looked like a rock that had been left out too long and survived too many meteor falls.

"Ironsides used to complain about how hard this job was," he grumbled. "You know the worst part about being in charge, Spin?"

"No, sir."

"Perspective. When you're young, you can assume that everyone older than you has life figured out. Once you get command yourself, you realize we're all just the same kids wearing older bodies."

I swallowed, but didn't say anything. Standing next to Cobb, I stared out the window at the desolate planet and the thousands of platforms surrounding it. An incredible network of defenses that—in the end—had been powerless to stop whatever this delver was.

"Spensa," Cobb said, "I need you to be more careful out there. Half my staff think you're the biggest liability we've ever put into a ship. The other half think you're some kind of Saint incarnate. I'd like you to stop supplying both sides with good arguments."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I . . . to be honest, I was trying to push myself, put myself in danger. I thought if I did that, it might make my brain work and my powers engage."

"While I appreciate the sentiment, that's a stupid way to try to solve our problems, Lieutenant."

"But we *do* have to figure out how to travel the stars. You yourself said it."

"I'd rather find a way that isn't so reckless," Cobb said. "We know the Superiority ships travel the stars. They have hyperdrive technology, and the eyes—the delvers—haven't destroyed *them*. So it's possible."

Cobb adopted a contemplative look, staring back out the window at the planet below. He was quiet for such a long time, I found myself growing nervous.

"Sir?" I asked.

“Come with me,” he said. “I might have a way for us to get off this planet that doesn’t rely upon your powers.”

I followed Cobb through the too-clean corridors of Platform Prime. Why were we walking back to the fighter bays?

He counted off the doors until stopping next to the dock where I kept M-Bot. Increasingly confused, I followed him through the small door. I'd expected to find the ground crew beyond, doing M-Bot's normal post-battle services. Instead, the room was empty save for the ship and one person. Rodge.

"Rig?" I asked, using his old callsign from when he'd been in Skyward Flight. That had only lasted a few days, but he was one of us all the same.

Rodge—who had been inspecting something on M-Bot's wing—jumped as I said his name. He spun to find us there, and blushed immediately. For a moment he was the old Rodge: earnest, gangly, and not a little awkward. He almost dropped his datapad as he quickly saluted Cobb.

"Sir!" Rodge said. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"At ease, Lieutenant," Cobb said. "How goes the project?"

The project? Cobb had said something about a project earlier—it involved M-Bot?

"See for yourself, sir," Rodge said, then tapped something on his datapad.

M-Bot's shape changed, and I actually yelped in surprise. In an instant, he looked like one of the black ships that were piloted by Krell aces.

*His holograms*, I realized. M-Bot was a long-range stealth ship, designed—best we could tell—for spy missions. He had what he called active camouflage, a fancy way of saying he could use holograms to change what he looked like.

"It's not perfect, sir," Rodge said. "M-Bot can't turn himself invisible, not with any real level of believability. Instead, he has to overlay his hull with some kind of image. Since he's not exactly the same shape as one of

those Krell ships, we had to fudge in places. You can see here that I made the hologram's wings bigger to cover up the tips of his hull."

"It's incredible," I said, walking around the ship. "M-Bot, I had no idea you could do this."

Rodge looked at his datapad. "Um . . . he sent me a text here, Spin. He says he's not talking to you because you muted him earlier."

I rolled my eyes, inspecting Rodge's work. "So . . . what's the point of this?"

Cobb folded his arms where he stood near the door. "I asked my command staff, scientists, and engineers to tackle the hyperdrive problem. How do we find a way off this planet? All the ideas I got back were wildly implausible, except one. It's only *mildly* implausible."

I stepped up beside Rodge, who was grinning.

"What?" I asked him.

"You know all those nights," he said, "when you'd come wake me up and force me to go on some insane adventure?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, I thought maybe I should get some revenge." He turned and swept his hand toward M-Bot, and the new, confident Rodge was back. He grinned widely, his eyes alight. This was a man in his element. "M-Bot has extremely advanced espionage capabilities. He can create detailed holograms. He can eavesdrop on conversations hundreds of meters away. He can hack enemy signals and computer systems with ease.

"We've been using him as a frontline combat ship, but that's not his true purpose. And as long as we use him just to fight, we're not utilizing his full potential. When the admiral asked for ideas on how to get ahold of the enemy hyperdrive technology, it occurred to me that the answer was staring us in the face. And occasionally pointing out how odd our human features look."

"You want to use him to infiltrate the Superiority," I said, the realization hitting me. "You want to *pretend* to be a Krell ship, then somehow steal their hyperdrive technology!"

"They launch drones from their space station nearby," Rodge said. "And we've observed new ships arriving there using hyperdrive technology. The very thing we need sits on our proverbial doorstep. M-Bot can use

holograms on us too. He could make a small team of us, equipped with mobile receptors like the one you wear, look like Krell.

“If we could somehow—in the confusion of a battle—make M-Bot imitate an enemy ship, we might be able to land him on their station. A small team of spies could unload, then pretend to be Krell just long enough to steal one of their real ships and escape with it. With that in hand, we could replicate their technology and escape the planet.”

I felt my jaw dropping at the audacity of it. “Rodge, that’s *insane*.”

“I know!”

“I love it!”

“I *know*!”

The two of us stood there, grinning like we had after stealing the claymore off the wall of the historical preservation chamber. It had taken both of us to lift it, but hey, we’d gotten to hold a real sword.

Together, we looked to Cobb.

“Krell ships likely have transponders,” he said, “for authentication.”

“M-Bot should be able to spoof one,” Rodge said.

“And you think you could do this, Spin?” Cobb asked me. “Imitate one of our enemies? Believably? Sneak onto an enemy station and steal one of their ships?”

“I . . .” I swallowed, and tried to be objective. “No. Sir, I’m a pilot, not a spy. I don’t have any training along these lines. I . . . well, I’d probably make a fool of myself.”

It hurt to admit that, as the plan was fabulous. But I had to be realistic.

“Jorgen said the same thing,” Cobb said.

“He knows about this plan?” I asked.

“We briefed him and the other senior flightleaders on the idea during our last command meeting. We all agreed that nobody in the DDF has this kind of expertise. We’ve spent eighty years drilling for direct battle, not espionage. We don’t *have* spies. But . . . Jorgen suggested that we start up a training program. Spin, if we do that, would you be willing to participate?”

“Of course,” I said, though the idea of more school—and less flying—gave me a pang of regret.

“Good, because that ship of yours still won’t let anyone else pilot it.” Cobb shook his head. “I think this is the only viable plan we have, though I just don’t like it. I can’t imagine one of us, no matter how well trained,

believably imitating a Krell. We're too different. Plus they're bound to find it strange when our ship lands on their station without following their protocol. We'd have to find some sort of excuse for why our ship is behaving oddly. Damaged systems maybe?

"In any case, Lieutenant McCaffrey, I'm giving you leave to continue developing this idea. Maybe start training all of Skyward Flight for espionage activities. Give me detailed plans. I wish we weren't pushed so far back against the wall. We might not have time to give this plan the proper preparation it would need. But with those battleships in place now . . ."

I opened my mouth to agree, but then stopped. I sensed something in the back of my mind. A strange sound, like a humming. I cocked my head, focusing on it. The sensation was new to me.

*There*, I thought as the sound came to a climax, then vanished. I tried to stretch out my cytonic senses to determine what it meant. *Did . . . did something just arrive?*

A call came on the comm. Cobb walked to the wall, answering it. "Yes?"

"Sir," Rikolfr's voice said. "One of the outer scouts spotted an alien ship *appearing* just outside the defense platforms. It's a small vessel, fighter size. It seems to have hyperjumped directly here."

"One ship?" Cobb asked.

"Just one, sir. Not of any Superiority design we know. We're scrambling a response team from planetside, but this is odd behavior. Why would they send a single ship? Surely we're past the days when they'd try to sneak up a bomber on Alta."

"How far away is it?" I asked, knowing the answer. It was close. I could feel it.

"Approaching the outermost shell now, at the orbital equator," Rikolfr said. "Analysis thinks it must be a new kind of drone sent to test platform gun emplacement response time."

"I'll go check it out, sir," I told Cobb. "A ship from up here will arrive before a planetside team."

Cobb eyed me.

"Please, sir," I said. "I won't do anything stupid."

"I'll order Quirk to go with you," he said. "Don't try to lose her, and *don't* engage this ship unless I give you orders. Understand?"



I nodded, and read the implication in those words. He was testing me. To see if I could still follow orders. I probably should have been embarrassed that such a test was necessary.

I scrambled to climb into my ship as Rodge and Cobb walked to the door. I had a lot to think about, with Rodge's plan—not to mention the lingering sense of disquiet I still felt at having seen the delver wearing my face.

For the moment though, I was too eager to get back in the cockpit. And to find out why the Superiority would send a single ship to test our defenses.

I quickly ran through the preflight checklist. “Ready to go, M-Bot?” I asked.

I was met by silence.

“M-Bot?” I asked, tapping the console, feeling a spike of concern. “You all right?”

“I’m not responding,” he said. “Because you don’t want to talk to me. Remember?”

Oh . . . right. He was still angry because I’d muted him earlier. I winced, unhooking his mobile receptor, and clicked it back into the dash. “Sorry about that. You were going to get me into trouble.”

“Spensa, it’s impossible for *me* to get *you* into trouble. I can merely point out preexisting trouble.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Well, obviously you don’t want me around. I can logically conclude, using very little processing power, that you feel you are better off without me.”

“Were all AIs as sulky as you are?” I asked.

“We were made as reflections of humankind, meant to imitate their actions and emotions.”

“Ouch. I asked for that one, didn’t I?” I glanced toward the green light that appeared on the wall, indicating that Cobb and Rodge were out and the bay was ready to depressurize. I engaged the maneuvering thrusters, then the door opened, and I steered my ship out into the vacuum.

A few minutes later, Kimmalyn’s ship hovered out of her own docking bay. “Hey,” she said over the line. “What exactly are we doing again?”

“We’ve spotted an unidentified alien ship approaching the planet. It’s coming in through the defensive layers right now.” I boosted forward alongside the thin edge of the platform.

Kimmalyrn fell in behind me. “A single ship? Huh.”

“I know.” I left off the part where I thought I’d felt it approaching. I didn’t know what that meant yet—or even if it was real. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s go,” a voice said from behind me in the cockpit, and I jumped. I spun my head to see a yellow-and-blue slug nestled into the spot between my toolkit and the cockpit’s emergency water supply.

“Doomslug?” I said.

The little animal mimicked the sound, as she was inclined to do. Great. I should’ve been annoyed at Dobsi and the rest of the ground crew for not keeping an eye on the slug, but . . . well, they weren’t pet sitters, they were mechanics. Plus, Doomslug had a habit of getting into places she wasn’t supposed to.

Hopefully I wouldn’t have to do any dangerous maneuvers; I wasn’t sure how many Gs Doomslug could pull. For now, I boosted toward the strange ship. True to his word, M-Bot didn’t say anything to me—but he did lay out a direction on the monitor, pointing the way we should head to intercept the ship. He then wrote a message for me on the screen.

*I’m tracking the ship’s progress via our surveillance beacons, and it is NOT taking a wise pathway. Multiple platforms are firing upon it.*

“Huh,” I said to him. “Maybe the technicians were right. They think it’s a scout drone sent to test something about the platforms.”

*There is a logic to that, he replied onscreen. If that ship had intended to actually reach Detritus, it would have picked a course that wove between the platforms, staying out of range. The Krell know how to do such things.*

I turned my ship and boosted in the direction M-Bot indicated, enjoying the sensation of g-forces pressing me back. I always felt more in control of my life when I was in a cockpit. I sighed, trying to push away the uneasiness I felt at having watched the video of that . . . thing.

“Interception in a minute and a half,” M-Bot said.

“What happened to the silent treatment?” I asked.

“You were looking too comfortable,” he said. “I decided that being silent is the wrong approach. Instead, I need to remind you what you’re missing while not talking to me—by showing you how wonderful my interaction is.”

“Whoopee.”

“Whoopee!” Doomslug repeated.

"I'm glad you two are pleased."

I boosted a little faster.

"Wait," M-Bot said. "Was *that* sarcasm?"

"From me? Never."

"Good. I . . . Wait. It *was* sarcasm!"

Ahead, a twinkling bit of light broke through the bottom layer of the defensive shells. A ship . . . trailing smoke.

"The ship made it through," I said. "But it's been hit."

"I can't believe that you—"

"M-Bot, archive that conversation," I said. "The enemy ship. How bad is the damage?"

"Moderately bad," he answered. "I'm surprised it's still in one piece. At this angle, my projections say it will crash into the planet and vaporize itself on impact."

"Permission to give chase," I said, calling Flight Command. "That ship is heading for the surface on a collision course."

"Granted," Cobb's voice answered. "But keep your distance."

Kimmalyn and I pulled in behind the ship, following it down toward the atmosphere of the planet. I could see the alien ship trying to pull up—it was a motion I instinctively recognized. I'd been there, in a damaged ship threatening to spiral into a crash. I'd fought unresponsive controls in a panic, the smell of smoke overwhelming, my world spinning.

The ship managed to recover enough to course correct and hit the atmosphere at a better angle. Whoever was flying that drone didn't want it to . . .

Wait. I couldn't hear anything—no commands being directed through the nowhere to the ship. Which meant that was no drone. There was a live pilot inside.

Air friction from reentry made my shield begin to glow, and my ship trembled as the atmosphere grew thick enough to be noticeable.

*That ship is going to tear itself apart if it stays at that angle,* I thought.

"Command, it's coming in hard," Kimmalyn said. "Orders?"

"I'm going to try to snare that ship before it crashes," I said.

"That could be dangerous," Cobb said.

"It jumped in using a hyperdrive. Do you want to let it pulverize itself, or do you want to try to grab the technology? Maybe if we save it, we won't

need to try Rodge's plan after all."

"Go ahead and chase the ship," he said. "But I'm scrambling the rest of Skyward Flight in case you need backup."

"Confirmed," I said. "Quirk, cover me. I'm going in for the ship."

"Sure," she answered, "but what if this is some kind of trap?"

"Then try not to laugh too hard while you haul me out of it."

"Spensa! What do you think I am? I would *never* gloat at you when you could see me."

I grinned, then slammed my throttle forward, hitting overburn and darting after the ship. Its barely controlled descent had thrown off M-Bot's intercept calculations, which he quickly redid.

Scud, it was going to be close. At these speeds, the ship would almost certainly destroy itself when it hit. The pilot seemed to know it; the ship jerked upward—trying to level out—but then dove right back down. The acclivity controls were obviously malfunctioning.

That got worse as the atmosphere thickened and the increasing rush of wind caused the alien ship to start spinning in a deadly rotation. Fortunately, my atmospheric scoops redirected airflow, giving me more control. My cockpit barely trembled, despite the speed of my acceleration straight toward the ship.

The incredible g-forces pushed through M-Bot's advanced GravCaps, and the familiar sensation of weight pressed me backward. It pulled my lips away from my teeth as I gritted them. It pulled my arms back, making them feel like they were tied with weights.

Behind me, Doomslug made an annoyed fluting sound. I glanced at her, but she'd hunkered down against the wall and gone rigid. She seemed to be able to handle this. I turned my attention back to the spiraling ship and focused on keeping it in the center of my vision. Its movements were growing increasingly erratic, and suddenly I was hit with a wave of emotion from inside that cockpit—an anxiety that somehow I connected to. A frantic, desperate panic.

I recognized something about the "tone" of those emotions—it felt as if they were being intentionally broadcast. Whoever was in there . . . they were the one who had spoken to me earlier, the one who had said they heard me.

This wasn't just an alien pilot. This was another cytonic.

*I'm coming*, I thought, hoping they could hear. *Hang on!*

"Spin?" Cobb's voice, over the intercom. "Spin, you *need* to catch that ship. Our analysts think it might be manned."

"Trying," I said through gritted teeth.

M-Bot's readout on my canopy told me we were under fifteen seconds from impact. We blasted down through the atmosphere, pointed straight toward the dusty surface below. The front of my ship was aglow, and I knew I was trailing my own burning line of smoke. Not from damage, but from the raw energy of cutting through the atmosphere like this.

*Now!* I thought, drawing just close enough to the alien ship. I launched my light-lance and speared it right between its twin boosters.

"Use cockpit rotation!" I screamed, pulling up—switching on my acclivity ring to counter the planet's gravity—and bracing myself as I frantically leveled off my dive.

Blackness crept across my vision as all the blood rushed to my feet, the g-forces now pointing down. M-Bot rotated my seat in an attempt to compensate—the human body is far better at taking forces straight back than it is at taking them downward.

The cockpit trembled as I slowed our descent. Scud . . . I hoped the g-forces didn't scramble the pilot. They nearly scrambled me. My vision blacked out completely for a few seconds, and my pressure suit constricted around my waist and legs, trying to force the blood back up into my brain.

As my vision returned I found myself trembling, my face sweaty and cold, a rushing sound in my ears. The ship slowed—mercifully—to a steady Mag-1. My cockpit seat rotated back as I pulled out of the dive completely.

I glanced over my shoulder to Doomsbug, who was fluting in an annoyed tone from where she'd been pressed against the wall. Did not having bones make this harder or easier for her? Either way, we both seemed to have weathered the moment.

I glanced out to see the ground speeding along below. We were maybe four or five hundred feet up. I still had the other ship though—my own ship towed it along behind with the glowing red-orange rope of the light-lance.

"That was a little close, Spin," Kimmalyn said in my ear. "Even for you. But . . . I guess it wasn't a trap?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice as I breathed in and out. Still, my hands were steady as I slowed us to a stop, hovering on my acclivity ring. I

carefully lowered the alien ship to the ground, then disengaged the light-lance and landed.

I waited—my cockpit open, feeling the breeze on my sweaty face—as Kimmalynd landed nearby. Cobb said he was sending a force of ground troops to handle the Krell captive, but didn't order me to stay back. So I climbed out and dropped down off the wing, my feet thumping on the dusty blue-grey landscape of Detritus. From down here, the defensive platforms and rubble belt of the lowest shell were just vague, distant patterns in the sky.

The alien ship was roughly the same size as M-Bot, so larger than our standard fighters. That meant it might be a long-range vessel, with more storage and room than a short-range fighter. It had a large cockpit set into the center of a circular fuselage, with wide arced wings and a destructor emplacement under each one. The ship also had a light-lance turret under its fuselage, in roughly the same place as M-Bot's. I hadn't seen those on any Krell fighters.

It was a combat fighter, obviously. The left wing bore a large blackened gap and scorch marks where the ship had been shot, and it had been ripped almost completely free in the descent.

Unfamiliar alien writing marked one side of the fuselage. Whatever I thought I'd sensed from the cockpit was gone now, and I felt a rising fear. *The alien must be dead.*

Unwilling to wait for Kimmalynd, I hauled myself up onto the alien ship's right wing—it was still warm from the descent, but cool enough to touch—and the ship tipped beneath my weight, reminding me it wasn't sitting on landing struts. I held on and climbed over to the canopy.

There, through the glass, I got my first up-close look at an alien. I had been expecting to find something similar to the crablike creatures I'd seen in the cockpits of Krell ships.

Shock moved through me, and my breath caught as I was confronted by something entirely different. What I saw instead was a humanoid woman.

She was both hauntingly familiar and strikingly alien, all at once. She had pale violet skin, stark-white hair, and bonelike white growths on her cheeks, underlining her eyes. Despite her alien features though, she had an obvious female shape beneath a snug flight jacket. She almost could have been one of us.

I was surprised—I hadn't realized there were aliens out there that looked so . . . human. I had always imagined that most of them would be like the Krell, creatures that were so strange they seemed to have more in common with rocks than humans.

I found myself staring at that elfin face, entranced, until I noticed the broken control panel and the blackened scorch marks on the left side of her stomach, which was wet with something darker than human blood. The panel had obviously exploded, and part had impaled her.

I scrambled to search for a manual cockpit release, but it wasn't where I expected to find it. That made sense—this was alien engineering. Still, it defied reason that there wouldn't be some kind of release on the outside of the ship. I felt around the canopy, searching for a latch, as Kimmalyn climbed up beside me. She gasped upon seeing the alien woman.

"Saints and stars," she whispered, touching the canopy glass. "She's beautiful. Almost . . . almost like a devil from one of the old stories . . ."

"She's wounded," I said. "Help me find—"

I cut off as I found it, right at the back of the canopy—a small panel that, when I threw it open, revealed a handle. I yanked it outward, and the canopy let out a hiss as it unsealed.

"Spensa, this is stupid," Kimmalyn said. "We don't know what kind of gases she breathes. And we could expose ourselves to alien bacteria or . . . or I don't know. There are a hundred reasons not to open that."



She was right. The air that came out did smell distinctly odd. Floral, but also acrid, scents that didn't go together in my experience. But it didn't seem to hurt me as I scrambled over and—not knowing what else to do—reached in to feel at the alien woman's neck for a pulse.

I felt one. Soft, irregular—though who knew if that was actually normal for her.

Suddenly the woman's eyes fluttered open, and I froze, meeting her violet eyes. I was shocked by how eerily *human* they were.

She spoke in a quiet voice, alien words with consonants I couldn't distinguish. Graceful, ephemeral, like the sounds of air rustling pages. It seemed oddly familiar.

"I don't understand," I said as she spoke again. "I . . ."

Scud. That dark liquid on her lips had to be blood. I scrambled to pull the emergency bandage from the cargo pocket on my leg. "Hang on!" I said, though Kimmalyn got hers out first and forced it into my hands.

I climbed farther into the cockpit, bracing myself against the broken control panel, and pressed the bandage against the woman's side. "Help is coming," I said. "They're sending . . ."

"Human," the woman said.

I froze. The word was in English. She seemed to notice my reaction, then tapped a small pin on her collar. When she spoke again in her airy language, the device translated.

"A real human," she said, then smiled, blood trailing down the side of her lip. "So it's true. You still exist."

"Just hang on," I said, trying to stanch the blood at her side.

She lifted her arm, trembling, and touched my face. Her fingers were covered in blood and felt wet on my cheek. Kimmalyn breathed out a small prayer, but I clung there—half in, half out of the cockpit—meeting the alien woman's eyes.

"We were allies once," she said. "They say that you were monsters. But I thought . . . nothing can be more monstrous than they are . . . And if anyone can fight . . . it would be the ones they locked away . . . the terror that once nearly defeated them . . ."

"I don't understand," I said.

"I opened myself up—I searched for you for so long. And only now did I finally hear you, calling out. Don't trust . . . their lies. Don't trust . . . their

false peace.”

“Who?” I said. What she was saying was too vague. “Where?”

“There,” she whispered, still touching my face. “Starsight.” I felt something beyond the word, a *force* that hit my brain like a collision. It stunned me.

Her hand dropped. Her eyes fluttered closed, and I feared she was dead—but I had trouble thinking through the strange impact to my mind.

“Saints and stars above,” Kimmalyyn repeated. “Spensa?” She checked the woman for a pulse again. “Not dead, just unconscious. Scud, I hope the troops bring a medical crew.”

Feeling numb, I reached out and took the small pin from the alien’s collar, the one that had translated the words. It was shaped like a stylized star or sunburst. What had that last part been? It felt drilled into my brain—a plea to go to this . . . place. Starsight?

I knew, intimately, that this woman was like me. Not just a cytonic, but a confused one, seeking answers. Answers she’d hoped to find in that place, the one she’d drilled into my brain.

*I . . . I could go there*, I realized. Somehow I knew that if I wanted, I could use the coordinates she’d placed into my head to teleport directly to the location.

I leaned back as three DDF troop transports landed gracefully on large blue acclivity rings next to the ship. They were accompanied by seven more fighters, the rest of Skyward Flight, scrambled to give backup that I hadn’t ended up needing.

I climbed down from the alien ship and backed away, reaching M-Bot as the alien ship became a hive of activity. Tucking the translator pin into my pocket, I hauled myself up onto his wing. *Please live*, I thought to the wounded alien. *I need to know what you are*.

“Hmmm,” M-Bot said. “Fascinating. Fascinating. She is from a small backwater planet that is not part of the Superiority. It seems the Superiority recently sent a message to her people asking for pilots to recruit into their space force. This pilot was a response to that request; she was sent to try out for the Superiority military.”

I blinked, then scuttled over to M-Bot’s open cockpit. “What?” I asked. “How do you know *that*?”

“Hmmm? Oh, I hacked her onboard computer. Not a very advanced machine, unfortunately. I was hoping to discover another AI, so we could complain about organics together. Wouldn’t that have been a fun time?”

“Fun time!” Doomslug said from where she’d climbed up onto the armrest of my seat.

I slipped into the cockpit. “You really did that?” I asked.

“Complaining about organics? Yes, it’s very easy. Did you know just how many dead cells you shed daily? All of those little pieces of you *litter* my cockpit.”

“M-Bot, focus. You hacked her computer?”

“Oh! Yes. As I said, it’s not very advanced. I got the entire database about her planet, people, culture, history. What do you want to know? Their planet was allied to the human forces in the last war—though many of their politicians now call the human presence there an authoritarian occupation—and several of their cultures were significantly influenced by human ones. Her language isn’t too different from your own, for example.”

“What is her name?” I asked softly, glancing over at her ship. The buzz of medical technicians around the cockpit gave me hope that she would survive her wound.

“Alanik of the UrDail,” he said, pronouncing her name as “ah-la-NEEK.” “Her flight logs say she was on her way to visit the Superiority’s largest deep-space commerce station. She never arrived though. She seems to have somehow found out where we were, and so came here instead. Oh! Spensa, she’s *cytonic*, like you! She is the only one of her people who can use the powers.”

I settled back in my seat, feeling numb.

M-Bot didn’t notice how much all this was disturbing me, as he just kept right on talking. “Yup, her log is encrypted, but I cracked that. She hoped to find answers about her powers among the Superiority, though her people don’t think highly of them. Something about the way they rule.”

*I can feel where she was planning to go . . .*, I thought again. The coordinates were burned into my brain, but they were fading like a dying engine. Sputtering and losing power. I could jump. I could go there. But only if I acted quickly.

I sat frozen in a moment of indecision. Then I stood up in my cockpit and called to Jorgen, who had climbed from his ship to observe the medical

staff.

“Jorgen!” I shouted. “I need you to come here *right now* and talk me out of doing something *incredibly stupid*.”

He turned toward me, then—with a look of sudden panic—ran over and hauled himself onto M-Bot’s wing. I didn’t know if I should be thankful he responded so quickly, or be embarrassed by how seriously he seemed to take the threat of me doing something stupid.

“What is it, Spin?” he asked, stepping up to my cockpit.

“That alien put coordinates in my brain,” I said, explaining in a rush. “She was going to go try out for the Superiority’s space force, since they’re recruiting, and she wanted to see if they knew anything about cytonics, but I just realized this is the *perfect* chance to put Rodge’s plan into action. If I went and imitated her, it wouldn’t seem nearly as odd as if we tried to imitate a Krell. M-Bot got her entire log and planetary database, and I can take her place. You need to stop me because, so help me, I’m just about ready to do it because the coordinates are *evaporating from my brain*.”

He blinked at the flood of words coming from my mouth.

“How long do we have?” he asked.

“I can’t be sure,” I said, anxious as I felt the impression fading. “Not long. Five minutes? Maybe? Yes, and my gut is telling me to go *right now*. Which is why I need you to talk me out of it!”

“All right, let’s consider.”

“We don’t have time to consider!”

“You said we have five minutes. Five minutes’ consideration is better than none.” Then—like the insufferable rock of protocol he was—he carefully set his helmet on the wing. “Rodge’s plan was for you to imitate a Krell pilot and sneak aboard their station here near Detritus.”

“Yes, but Cobb doesn’t think we could *ever* imitate one of the Krell.”

“Then what makes you think you could imitate this alien?”

“She is from a backwater world,” M-Bot piped up. “Which is not an official part of the Superiority. Nobody in the Superiority will have met any members of her species, so anything Spensa does will not feel out of character.”

“She might still seem human to them,” Jorgen said.

“Which will be fine,” I said. “Because Alanik—that’s her name—came from a world that was allies with the humans not long ago.”

“Indeed,” M-Bot said, “they had a great deal of cultural exchange.”

“You don’t speak the Superiority languages,” Jorgen said.

I hesitated, then fished in my pocket for the translator pin I’d taken from the alien. The medics had her hooked up to a breathing device and were extracting her—carefully—from her ship. I felt a spike of concern, even though I’d only just met her.

I could still feel her touch in my mind. And her plea. A fading arrow in my brain, pointing into the stars.

I held up the pin for Jorgen to see. “I can use this pin to translate for me, I think.”

“Confirmed,” M-Bot said. “I can set it to output in English so you’ll understand what they’re saying.”

“All right, that’s a start,” Jorgen said. “Now, can you imitate that pilot’s ship with your holograms?”

“I’d need to do a scan of it.”

“Well, I guess we don’t have time—”

“Done,” M-Bot said. Then he shifted to an imitation of the alien’s downed ship. It was a far better fit than the Krell ship had been; M-Bot and Alanik’s ship were much closer in shape and size.

Jorgen nodded.

“You’re thinking I should go,” I said to him. “Scud, you actually think I should go through with this!”

“I think we should consider all of our options before making a decision. How much time left?”

“Not much! A minute or two! It’s not like I have a clock in my brain. The sensation is just fading. Quickly.”

“M-Bot, can you successfully make her look like that alien?”

“If she has the bracelet on,” he said.

I scrambled to pull it off his dash and slap it on.

“Handily,” M-Bot said, “our medics just finished a scan of her for vitals. And . . . There.”

My hands changed color to light purple as he overlaid my face and skin with a hologram of Alanik. M-Bot even changed my flight suit to match hers, and the imitation was perfect.

I stared at my hands, then looked at Jorgen.

“Scud,” he whispered. “That’s uncanny. All right. So what is the plan?”

“There’s no time for a plan!”

“There’s time for a quick outline. You go to the recruitment station in this alien’s place, then claim to be her. You try out for the enemy’s military . . . Wait, why are they recruiting new pilots? They’re probably increasing their troop numbers to come fight us, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. That would make sense.

“That might be useful. If you did this, you could gather valuable intel on their operations. From there, you would try to steal a hyperdrive—or get some pictures of one for the engineers—then you teleport back here. Do you think you can get back on your own?”

I grimaced. “I don’t know. My powers . . . aren’t very consistent. But Alanik’s records said she was going to the Superiority because she hoped to learn about her own abilities from them.”

“So either you’ll have to figure that out, or you’ll *have* to steal a hyperdrive somehow, then get yourself and M-Bot back to us with the stolen technology.”

“Yeah.” It sounded impossible when he outlined it like that. Yet I looked up toward the stars, and I felt a fire burning within me. “It sounds crazy,” I told him. “But Jorgen, I think I have to go. I *have* to try this.”

I looked down, meeting his eyes as he stood on the wing beside my cockpit. Then, remarkably, he nodded. “I agree.”

“You *do*?”

“Spin, you can be reckless—even foolhardy—but I’ve flown with you nearly a year now. I trust your instincts.”

“My instincts get me into trouble.”

He reached over, putting his hand on the side of my face. “You’ve gotten *us* out of far more trouble than you’ve ever gotten *yourself* into, Spensa. Scud, I don’t know if this mission is the right thing to do. But I *do* know our people are in serious danger. We talk optimistically, but the command staff knows the truth. We’re dead here unless we find a way to use hyperdrives ourselves.”

I put my hand on his. The information in my brain was dimming. Only seconds remained.

“Can you do this?” he asked me. “Does your gut say you can?”

“Yes,” I whispered. Then, more firmly—with the strength of a warrior—I repeated it. “Yes. I *can* do this, Jorgen. I’ll get us a hyperdrive and bring it

back. I promise.”

“Then go. I trust you.”

I realized that was what I needed. Not his permission, or even his approval. I needed his trust.

In a moment of impulse I sprang from the cockpit, then grabbed him by his flight suit and pulled him down so I could kiss him. We probably weren’t ready for that, and it probably wasn’t the time, but I did it anyway. Because . . . well, scud. He’d just encouraged me to trust my instincts.

It was wonderful. I felt a strength to him as he kissed me back, an almost *electricity* coursing through him into me—then back again stronger because of the fire that burned in my chest. I lingered in the kiss as long as I dared, then pulled away.

“I should go with you,” he said.

“Unfortunately,” M-Bot said, “we have only one mobile receptor. You’d be identified as a human immediately.”

Jorgen grunted. “I suppose someone has to explain this to Cobb anyway.”

“He’s going to be mad . . . ,” I said.

“He’ll understand. We made the best decision we could with the limited time and information we had. Saints help us, I think we have to try this. Go.”

I held his eyes for a moment, then broke the gaze and jumped back down into the cockpit.

Jorgen touched his lips with his hand, then shook himself, picked up his helmet, and leaped off M-Bot’s wing. He pulled back to where everyone else was focused on the alien’s ship, oblivious to the powerful moments that had transpired.

“I’m confused at what just happened between the two of you,” M-Bot said. “I thought you insisted to me several times that you had no romantic inclinations toward Jorgen.”

“I lied,” I said, seizing on the compelling sensation the alien had embedded in my brain. It was nearly gone, but it still felt like an arrow into the sky. Just as it threatened to disappear completely, I somehow yanked on it.

“Cytonic hyperdrive online,” M-Bot said. “It actually—”

We vanished.

# PART TWO



I was only in the nowhere for a moment, but in that place, time seemed to have no meaning. I floated alone, with no ship. Infinite blackness surrounded me, punctuated by lights that seemed so much like stars—only malevolent. They could see me hanging there, exposed. I felt like a rat suddenly dropped on a string into the middle of a cage full of starving wolves.

The eyes focused on me, and their anger built. I was trespassing in their domain. I was an insignificant worm . . . but my presence still brought them *pain*. My world and theirs did not belong together. Their lights surged toward me. They'd rip my very soul to shreds and leave only scraps of—

I appeared back in M-Bot's cockpit.

“—worked!” M-Bot finished.

“Ah!” I yelled, jolting. I grabbed the sides of my cockpit seat. “Did you see any of that?”

“See what?” M-Bot said. “My chronometer indicates no time has passed. You engaged the cytonic hyperdrive . . . or, well, I think you *are* the cytonic hyperdrive.”

I put my hand to my chest, pressing it against the thick material of my flight suit, which seemed very strange now that it was the wrong color. My heart raced and my mind reeled. That place . . . the nowhere. It had been like swimming through a deep-cavern lake without any lights. All the while knowing *things* lay beneath, watching me, reaching for me . . .

*That was them*, I thought. *The things that destroyed the people of Detritus. The things we saw in the recording.* The delvers were real. They and the eyes *were* the same thing.

I breathed in and out deeply, calming myself with effort. At least the hyperjump had worked. I had used my powers again, with the help of the coordinates that Alanik had placed in my mind.

Right. Time to be a hero. I could do this.

“Spensa!” M-Bot said. “We’re being contacted!”

“By who?” I asked.

“By whom!” Doomslug said from beside me.

“You’ve brought us in near a Superiority space station of some size,” M-Bot said. “Look at your five. The radio chatter here is quiet, but distinct.”

I rested my hand comfortingly on Doomslug, who was fluting in annoyance, perhaps sensing my discomfort. I searched in the direction M-Bot had indicated, and saw something I’d missed in my first brief scan of the starfield. It was a distant station of some sort—lights in the darkness that were clustered around a central flat plane.

“Starsight,” I said. “That’s what the alien, Alanik, called it.” I scrambled to pull on my helmet and buckle in. “They’re contacting us? What are they saying?”

“Someone on the station is asking us for identification,” M-Bot said. “They’re speaking in Dione, a Superiority standard language.”

“Can you spoof Alanik’s transponder signal?”

“Doing so.”

“Great. Then stall them for a little bit while I think through this.”

M-Bot clearly still looked like the alien ship, and—judging by my soft violet hands—my hologram was still working as well. If this mission failed, it wouldn’t be due to the limitations of the technology—it would be because of the limitations of the spy.

“First things first,” I said. “We need to check our retreat and see if we can get home, if things go poorly. Give me just another minute or so.”

I breathed in and out, calming myself, doing the exercises Gran-Gran had taught me. Exercises she’d learned from her mother, who had been the one who’d hyperjumped our old space fleet before we’d crashed on Detritus.

I’d jumped here to perform this mission, but I wanted to know: Could I jump back if I needed to? Everything would get a whole lot easier if this expansion of my powers, as granted by Alanik touching my brain, could work again.

I imagined myself floating in space . . . stars zipping around . . . Yes, having just hyperjumped, I felt a familiarity to the action. The nowhere was close. I’d *just* been there. I could return.

Those things would see me again.

*Don't think about that*, I told myself sternly. I concentrated on the exercise. I was flying, shooting through the stars, zipping away . . .

*Where?* That was the problem. For anything other than a very short jump, I'd need to know exactly where I was going. I couldn't simply reverse the directions Alanik had given me, because they hadn't included my starting point of Detritus, only my destination of this space station.

"M-Bot," I said, coming out of my trance. "Can you calculate our location?"

"Currently calculating, using astronomical data. But I warn you, Spensa, my stalling is *not* working. They're sending ships out to investigate."

"What have you been doing?"

"Sending them binary code."

"*What?*" I said. "That's how you decided to *stall*?"

"I don't know! I figured, 'Organics like dumb things, and this is pretty dumb.' In hindsight, maybe it wasn't dumb enough? Anyway, they'll have visual on us within the minute."

The moment of truth. I took a deep breath. I was a warrior. Trained by my grandmother from childhood to face my heroic destiny with courage. *You can do this*, I told myself. *It's just a battle of a different kind. Like Hua Mulan or Epipole of Carystus, going to battle wearing another person's identity.*

I'd heard those stories a dozen times over from Gran-Gran. The thing was, the subterfuge of both women had eventually been discovered. And it hadn't exactly gone well for either one.

I'd just have to be sure not to end up like them. I turned M-Bot as two ships approached from the distant station. Boxy and painted white, they were like the Krell shuttlecraft I'd seen at the space station near Detritus.

The two ships leveled off with mine, rotating to the same axis so we could see each other through the glassy fronts of their crafts. The pilots were a pair of aliens with crimson skin. They didn't wear helmets, and I could see that they were hairless and had prominent eye ridges and cheekbones. They looked basically humanoid—two arms, one head—but were alien enough that I couldn't distinguish their gender.

M-Bot patched through their communication, and alien chatter filled my cockpit. I dug out Alanik's translating device and clicked it on, and the

chatter was translated into her language, which didn't do me a whole lot of good.

"M-Bot," I hissed. "You said you'd fix that."

"Whoops," he said. "Hacking into the pin's language interface . . . Ha! I activated the English setting."

"Unidentified ship," an alien said. "Do you require assistance? Please classify yourself."

I launched right into it. No choice now. "My name is Alanik of the UrDail. I'm a pilot and messenger from the planet . . ."

"ReDawn," M-Bot whispered.

"From the planet ReDawn. I have come to be a pilot for you guys. Um, in your space force. Like you asked?" I winced. That wasn't terribly convincing. "Sorry about the odd communication earlier. My computer can be a real pain sometimes."

"Ha ha," M-Bot said to me. "*That* was sarcasm. I can tell because it wasn't actually funny."

The two patrol ships were silent for some time, probably having switched over to a private comm line. I was left to wait, hanging there in space, worrying. I examined their boxy white ships—and oddly, I couldn't find any weapon ports on them.

"Emissary Alanik," one of the aliens said, coming back on, "Platform Docking Authority sends you welcome. It seems they have been expecting you, though they note that you're later than you said you'd be."

"Um," I said. "Some unimportant troubles back home. But it's possible I might have to leave in a little bit, then come back again."

"Whatever you wish. For now, you've got dock clearance. Berth 1182, which is in the seventh sector. An official will meet you there. Enjoy your visit."

With that, they turned around and flew back toward the station.

I remained tense. Surely this was a trap. Surely they'd seen through my crude attempt at subterfuge. I eased forward on the throttle, following after the two ships—and they didn't react.

I had them right in my sights. I could have blown them both from the sky, particularly with how closely—and lackadaisically—they were flying. How in the name of the Seventy Saints could they stand having their backs

to me? The smart thing would have been to have me fly on ahead at a safe distance, so they could watch me from a position of power.

I accelerated, but stayed in range to fire on the ships if they turned on me. They didn't seem to even *notice*. If this was a trap, they were doing an awfully good acting job.

Doomslug fluted nervously. I agreed.

"M-Bot," I said, "have you calculated where we are yet?"

"Indeed," he said. "We're not too far from Detritus—only some forty light-years. This station, which you correctly named Starsight, is an important trading waystop. It houses the Superiority regional government."

"Give me the coordinates—the direction and distance—to Detritus."

"Easy," M-Bot said. "Data is on your screen."

Several long numbers popped up on my proximity screen's readout. I frowned, then reached out to locate them with my fledgling cytonic senses. Only, reached out to . . . where? Those numbers were so large, they barely meant anything to me. Sure, they told me where Detritus was, but I still didn't *know* where it was. Couldn't *feel* it, like I had when Alanik sent me her cytonic impression of Starsight's location.

"That's not going to work," I said. "I won't be able to get us out unless I figure out more about my powers."

"Theoretically," M-Bot said, "we'll be leaving with a stolen Superiority hyperdrive, right?"

"That's the plan. I'd just feel better about this if I knew we had an escape route. How long would it take to fly back to Detritus the long way?"

"By the 'long way' you mean at sublight speeds?" M-Bot said. "That would probably take us roughly four hundred years, depending on how close to light speed we managed to get before using half our power, then accounting for deceleration on the other end. Sure, time dilation would make it seem like less time passed for us—but only about four years' difference at that speed, so you'd still be super-dead by the time we arrived."

Great. That wasn't an option. But Jorgen and I had both known that I might end up trapped here. This was the mission. It was unlike anything I'd undertaken before, but I was the only one who could do it.

I boosted, drawing closer to the station, which was larger than I'd estimated. Scale and size were difficult to judge in space. The station

looked kind of like one of the platforms that surrounded Detritus. A floating city—shaped like a disc, with buildings sprouting from both sides. A bubble of something glowing and blue surrounded it.

I'd always assumed that people lived *inside* stations like this, but as we drew closer and closer, I saw that wasn't the case. People lived on the *surface* of this station, walking about with the open blackness above them. *That bubble must keep in air and heat, making it habitable.* Indeed, as we drew closer, the two patrol ships passed through the bluish shield.

I stopped outside that shell. Then, one last time, I tried to use my cytonic senses. I reached out in the direction M-Bot had indicated, and felt a faint . . . fluttering at the edges of my mind. That was the right direction. I could feel someone there. Alanik, maybe?

It wasn't enough. I couldn't teleport myself back. So it was time to enter the enemy's base. I braced myself, then guided my ship through the envelope of the air shield.

It was beautiful.

As my alien guides led me closer, I could see that the station flowed with greenery. Parks filled with trees that towered some ten or fifteen meters tall. Large swaths of a dark green substance that M-Bot identified as a kind of moss, soft to walk on.

Back on Detritus, life was austere. Sure, there was the occasional statue, but buildings on the surface were plain and simple—they were built more like bunkers. And down below, the caverns were dominated by the apparatus and the red light of the manufactories. Humankind had existed on the brink of extinction for so long that survival—by necessity—trumped expression.

This place, in contrast, proclaimed its artistry like a battle standard. Buildings rose in spiral patterns or marched in colorful rows. It seemed like every second block contained a park. I could see the people moving among it all with a certain lazy cast to them, many idling in parks. Ships that floated around in the atmosphere didn't seem to be in any particular hurry. Here, people relaxed and enjoyed themselves.

I distrusted the place immediately.

Alanik had told me not to trust their peace. While I didn't know that I could trust *her*, I certainly didn't need a warning. The Superiority had kept my people imprisoned on Detritus for the last eighty years. My father and many of my friends had been killed because of the Superiority. The place could feign a beautiful, welcoming air, but I would *not* let down my guard.

"There is almost no radio chatter," M-Bot said. "Nor is there a single wireless network."

"They're afraid of delvers," I said, shivering. "They must have the same traditions that we have—limiting wireless communication only to necessary situations."

“Indeed. Fortunately, I’ve been able to deduce our prescribed landing location by reading the numbers of bays we’ve passed. I’ll map it for you.”

I followed his directions to an open metallic field of small raised platforms near the center of the city. As I set down on the proper one, I sank into my seat. Like Platform Prime, this place had an artificial gravity field.

“Pressure has been equalized with the outside,” M-Bot said. “And the atmosphere is breathable for you, though with a higher oxygen content than you’re accustomed to. Initial scans indicate no dangerous microorganisms.”

All right. I opened the canopy. An alien with a squidlike face stepped over to my ship. “Steps, ramp, slime slide, or other?” they called up to me, my pin translating.

“Um . . .” I gestured for them to wait, hoping they’d understand, then hissed to M-Bot. “Wait, what if they recognize that I’m speaking in English, instead of Alanik’s language?”

“I don’t think any of them will know her language,” M-Bot replied. “In fact, she would probably have had to speak an Earth language to be understood. Her records indicate she spoke fluent Mandarin, and you saw that she knew some English. Her planet did spend three decades acting as a staging ground for human forces during the last war, after all.”

“And the people here will understand English?”

“The translator pins they wear should. Alanik’s records indicate there were three attempted human galactic conquests in the past, and that left many cultures knowing Earth languages. All translators seem to carry English, Spanish, Hindi, and Mandarin by default.”

I nodded, moving to call to the dockworkers—but then I hesitated. “Wait. What was that you said? My ancestors tried to conquer the galaxy *three times*?”

“And quite nearly succeeded each time,” M-Bot said. “According to the records on Alanik’s ship. Many in the Superiority apparently name the ‘human scourge’ the greatest threat the galaxy has ever known.”

Wow. I was impressed, though a little piece of me was also . . . disturbed. It was inspiring to hear that my ancestors had been the heroic warriors I’d always imagined, but at the same time I’d always thought of my kind as being oppressed. Unjustly and unfairly beaten down by the Krell, denied freedom by a terrible alien force.



Surely there was a reason we'd been *forced* to fight. Besides, enemy propaganda could claim what it wanted; that didn't justify what had been done to us on Detritus. I narrowed my eyes, determined not to believe their lies.

"Sorry," I said, leaning out to call to the dockworkers. "Had a communication I had to deal with. You asked if I wanted a ramp or steps? Steps will be fine."

The squid-faced creature waved, and a larger creature with a grey-stone appearance rolled over a set of mobile steps. I hesitated, looking out at the bustling alien city. The place felt dark, even with large spotlights on the tops of buildings illuminating everything. The sky was still black. From inside, I couldn't see the air bubble as I looked up—I just saw an endless expanse, the stars mostly washed out by the lights.

"Let's see," the squid-faced creature said, climbing up the steps to join me. "You've got diplomatic berthing privileges. So take your time! We'll get this ship washed up and—"

"No," I said. "Please. I'm very protective of my ship. Don't let anyone touch it."

The alien's translator interpreted my words, then their squid tentacles slithered in a distinctly annoyed expression. "You sure?"

"Yes," I said, imagining someone discovering the hologram. "Please."

"Well, all right," the creature said, typing something on a handheld screen. This being had long, wiggly arms that ended in a branching pair of two blue tentacles instead of hands. "Here's an access ticket, if you want to send anyone else with authorization to fly the ship. I suggest you not lose it." The tablet ejected a small chip, which the squid creature handed over. Then they climbed back down the steps.

I pocketed the chip, and was again struck by how good M-Bot's holograms were. He had overlapped my flight suit with an image of Alanik's, but the pocket was still right where I expected. And interacting with solid objects—like touching the chip with my hologram-coated fingers—didn't disturb the illusion.

This, and the fact that the alien hadn't reacted to me speaking English, made my confidence grow. What next? I had to find out how to sign up for their military. That was step one. After that, I could try the more difficult part—stealing a hyperdrive.

How did I start, though? This place was *enormous*. Outside the docking area, the city streets stretched for kilometers, lined with towering buildings and bustling foot traffic. Ships zoomed overhead. There had to be millions upon millions of people here.

*The aliens who intercepted me above, I thought, said that someone would be sent to meet me once I landed.* Which gave me some time, so I settled in and reached out with my mind again, trying to find Detritus. Only, something was blocking my senses. A . . . thickness. It was like trying to move in high gravity. *Huh.* As I was considering that, someone outside the cockpit spoke loudly, and my pin translated.

“Emissary Alanik?” the voice asked.

I leaned out to find an alien standing on my launchpad. They were a tall, slender creature with vivid blue skin. This species seemed to be of a similar race to the crimson ones I’d seen earlier piloting the patrol ships—this individual also lacked hair and had the same cheekbones and eye ridges.

The creature wore a set of robes that were a softer, paler blue than their skin tone. Like the others, this one had androgynous features. I couldn’t tell if they were male or female—or something else entirely—from their appearance or voice.

“Ah!” they said to me. “Emissary. We are very glad you decided to respond to our request! I am Cuna, and have been assigned to aid you during this visit. Would you mind coming down? I’ve arranged for you to have housing here on Starsight, and I can show you the way.”

“Sure!” I called. “Let me stow my helmet.” I ducked back into the cockpit. “All right, M-Bot. Tell me what to do.”

“How should I know?” he replied. “This was your plan.”

“Technically, it’s Rodge’s plan. Either way, I’m not a spy—but you were designed for this kind of operation. So tell me what to do. How should I act?”

“Spensa, you’ve seen me interact with organics. You really think I’m going to be able to do a better job than you at imitating another one?”

He had a point. Scud. “This is going to be difficult. That alien down there seems to know something about Alanik and her people. What if I say something wrong?”

“Maybe you could pretend to be quiet, and not speak much.”

“Quiet?” I asked. “Me?”

“Yes. Pretend that Alanik is reserved.”

“Reserved. *Me?*”

“You see, that is why it’s called *pretending*. Rodge and I have been working on this—my ability to accept that sometimes human beings do not accurately present who they are. In any case, maybe this would have been something good to think about *before* volunteering for the spy mission behind enemy lines.”

“We didn’t have much time to think.” Still, there was no helping it. I tried to keep a warrior’s calm as I retrieved the sidearm from my weapons locker and tucked it into the voluminous pocket of my flight suit’s trousers. That attitude was growing harder and harder to attain as I realized the magnitude of what this mission would require of me.

I put in the tiny wireless earpiece that paired with the mobile receptor bracelet to let M-Bot talk to me privately from a distance, and he disguised it as jewelry with a hologram. Then I put Doomslug on the back floor of the cockpit and pointed at her. “Stay,” I said.

“Stay?” she fluted.

“I’m serious.”

“Serious?”

I was pretty sure she couldn’t understand me—she was just a slug. Hopefully she’d stay put for once. Finally, I heaved myself out and climbed down to the launchpad.

“Sorry for the delay,” I said to Cuna.

Their translator worked, spitting the words out for them, and—like the dockworker—Cuna either didn’t notice I’d spoken in English, or didn’t care.

“Not at all, not at all,” Cuna said, tucking their tablet under their arm. “I’m extremely pleased to meet you. It was by my personal request that an offer was sent to your people.”

*Scud.* I’d been hoping that the people here wouldn’t know much about Alanik’s. I’d been under the impression that a general call for pilots had been made, not individual requests.

“You’re that interested in my people?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. We’re preparing a very special operation, for which we will need an unusually large number of trained pilots. It has been decided that this might be an excellent way for the Superiority to judge the skill of some

racers that have stood for too long outside the Superiority's fold. But that is a discussion for a little later! Come. Let me show you to your housing."

Cuna started off down a path among the launchpads, and I had no choice but to follow. I hated leaving my ship behind, but M-Bot's mobile receptor had a good hundred-kilometer communication range to it. Plus, the hologram would continue to work even if I went outside that range, so I shouldn't need to worry.

I hurried along behind Cuna and exited the landing area. *Don't gawk*, I told myself. *Don't gawk. Don't gawk.*

I gawked.

It was impossible to resist. Buildings towered high on either side of the walkway, like runways toward the stars. People of all shapes, sizes, and colors flowed around me—all dressed in clothing like I'd never seen. No one was wearing anything that even remotely looked like a uniform.

It was all so much to take in. Far overhead, ships darted in every direction, but between us and them, floating discs with acclivity rings on the bottom ferried people quickly from one section of the city to another. It was a place of constant motion and lush indulgence. Gardens on every other corner, shops selling clothing of all varieties. Scents of unfamiliar foods drifting from stalls.

There had to be at least a thousand different races represented here, but two varieties were by far more common than others. The first was the Krell. I jumped despite myself as I saw the first one march by, though this one looked slightly different from the bodies we'd recovered from the manned fighters we'd shot down. The armor these Krell wore was crystalline instead of metallic, and looked more like brownish-pink sandstone. The shape of it was the same—something like the old pictures I'd seen of Earth knights. Only, these Krell wore a helmet with a clear faceplate, revealing a liquid within and a small crablike creature piloting from inside the head.

I'd always seen the Krell as imposing, dangerous. They were battlefield warriors, clad in armor and ready for a fight. Yet here they were mostly in stalls, selling goods to passersby, waving clawlike armored arms in sweeping gestures. My translator picked up their calls, delivering the words of the various shopkeepers as we passed.

"Come, friend! Be welcome!"

"A wonderful outfit you wear, and well accompanied!"

“Have you heard about the recruitment effort? Don’t worry if you don’t want to listen!”

One stumbled a little close to me, and although I instinctively reached for my pocket—and the weapon hidden in it—the creature apologized *at least* six times while backing away.

“This is curious,” M-Bot said in my ear. “I’m recording all of this for later analysis.”

“Those are the—”

“Don’t speak to me!” M-Bot told me in my ear. “Cuna’s translator will translate the words for them. My stealth systems can mask our communication, but you should endeavor to pretend you don’t have a wireless link to anyone. Later, we’ll set up your bracelet so you can tap instructions to me in DDF flight code. For now, I suggest you just stay quiet.”

I snapped my mouth closed. Cuna gave me an inquisitive look, but I just shook my head and smiled as we kept walking.

But scud, the Krell. When I’d first traveled into space and confronted them a few months back, they’d been *terrified* of me. Perhaps that had to do with the way my people had nearly conquered the galaxy, but these things *all* seemed to be timid. How could they be the same mighty force that had kept humankind imprisoned on Detritus for eighty years?

This place had to be some kind of false front, I decided. A propaganda strategy meant to improve the Superiority’s image. It made sense. Create a big hub where lots of races visit, then pretend to be harmless and unassuming.

More confident that I understood what was going on, I continued to survey my surroundings. The other most common alien race here was the ones like Cuna, my guide. They wore a variety of clothing types, from robes to casual trousers and shirts, and seemed to come in three different skin shades. Crimson, blue, and dark purple.

“Overwhelming, isn’t it?” Cuna asked.

I nodded. That was the truth, at least.

“If I may be so bold,” Cuna continued. “Your people were wise in agreeing to send us a pilot. If you do well in this preliminary program, we can enter into a more formal deal with your people. In exchange for an

entire force of pilots, we will offer the UrDail citizenship. It has been a long time coming; I'm glad to see relations between us normalizing."

"It's a good deal," I said, choosing my words carefully. "You get pilots. We get to join the Superiority."

"As secondary citizens," Cuna said. "Of course."

"Of course," I said, though I must have sounded hesitant, because Cuna glanced at me.

"You aren't clear on the distinction?"

"I'm sure the politicians understand," I said. "I'm just a pilot."

"Still, it would be good for you to know the stakes of your test here. You see, your people are special. Most species who haven't yet joined the Superiority are relatively primitive—with a low intelligence designation. They tend to be brutal, warlike, and technologically backward.

"The UrDail, on the other hand, have been a spacefaring people for centuries now. You have nearly reached primary intelligence and have a functioning world government. Normally, you'd have been invited among our ranks generations ago. Except for one big black mark."

*Cytonics?* I wondered.

"Humans," Cuna said as we walked. "You fought alongside the human scourge during the Third Human War a century back."

"They forced us to do so," I answered.

"I would not seek to dispute the facts as you present them," Cuna said. "Suffice it to say that many within the Superiority are convinced you are too aggressive to join us."

"Too aggressive?" I said, frowning. "But . . . didn't you come to us looking to recruit fighter pilots?"

"It is a delicate balance," Cuna said. "We have some very special projects that require pilots, but we don't want to corrupt our military with those who are too aggressive. Some say that your people's proximity to humans has let their ways infiltrate your society."

"And . . . what do you think?" I asked.

"I am part of the Department of Species Integration," Cuna replied. "Personally I believe there is a home for many different types of species in the Superiority. You can be an advantage to us, should you prove worthy."

"Sounds great," I said dryly, then immediately winced at the tone. Maybe I *should* just try not to say anything.

Cuna eyed me, but when they spoke, their voice was calm. “Surely you can see the advantages to your people. You’ll have access to our galactic hubs such as this station, and the right to buy passage and cargo space on our trade ships. You will no longer be trapped in your little planetary system, but can experience the galaxy at large.”

“We already can though,” I said. “I came here on my own.”

Cuna stopped, and at first I worried I’d said something wrong. Then Cuna smiled. It was a distinctly *disturbing* expression on their face, predatory, showing too many teeth. “Well,” they said. “That is another matter which we shall discuss.”

Cuna turned and waved their hand toward a small, narrow building alongside the road. Squeezed between two larger structures, it was three stories high. Like all the buildings on the platform, it seemed to have been made of metal originally—but it had been painted to give it a fake brick look.

“Here is the building we offer for your quarters,” Cuna said. “It is large for one individual, but it is our hope that—once you’ve proven yourself—we can house an entire squadron or more of your pilots here. We thought it appropriate to give you this to begin. As you can see, it has a private docking berth on the top, should you wish to land your ship here. It is conveniently located near the main docks, however—and close to several parks and markets.”

Cuna started up the short steps leading to the building.

“I don’t like this,” M-Bot said in my ear. “Spensa? If you get killed in an ambush, I’m going to be very surprised.”

I hesitated. Could this be some sort of trap? To what end? They could have just blown me out of the sky—or at least tried to—during my approach.

“That was me practicing lying,” M-Bot noted. “I wouldn’t be surprised, because I just anticipated it. But I *would* be disappointed. Well, I’d simulate disappointment.”

I headed up the steps. Cuna did seem to think that I really was Alanik. It didn’t feel like a trap.

Together, we stepped into the building. I was used to being the shortest person in the room, but Cuna’s limber build—which was too willowy to feel human—made me feel not just short, but squat and awkward as well.

This building had high ceilings and doorways, and even the counters were a tad too tall for me. It seemed to have been built for people of a taller race, though Alanik had been about my height.

Cuna led me to a small room at the front that was lit by recessed ceiling lights and had a window looking out at the street. The room was comfortable-looking, furnished with plush chairs and a boardroom-style table. The walls had been painted to make them seem like wood—though tapping one with my fingernail proved they were metal.

Cuna sat down with a graceful motion, setting their tablet on the table, then smiled at me again with that too-predatory look. I lingered near the door, unwilling to sit and put my back to my exit.

“You are what we call a cytonic, Alanik,” Cuna said to me. “Your people don’t have true faster-than-light travel or hyperdrives, so you have to rely on cytonic people. And since you have very few, you remain primarily locked into your backwater of the galaxy.”

Cuna met my eyes, and I could swear I saw careful calculation in there.

I felt increasingly on edge. They seemed to know more about Alanik than I would’ve wanted. “What can you tell me?” I asked. “About what I am. About what I can do.”

Cuna settled back in the seat, lacing their fingers, lips drawn to an emotionless line. “What you do is dangerous, Emissary Alanik. Surely you’ve felt the attention of the delvers on you, in the negative realm where you go between moments when you’re engaging in a hyperspace jump?”

I nodded. “I call it the nowhere.”

“I’ve never experienced it myself,” Cuna said idly. “And the delvers? You’ve felt them?”

“I see eyes watching me. The eyes of something that lives in that place.”

“That is them,” Cuna said. “Centuries ago, my kind learned firsthand how dangerous the delvers are. Thirteen of the . . . creatures entered into our realm. They rampaged, destroying planet after planet.

“Eventually, we realized that our cytonics had drawn them to us—and once here, delvers could hear our communications. Not just cytonic communication; they could hear even things like radio waves. We made the painful transition away from using cytonics, and even normal communications. We made our planets, and our fleets, silent.



“The delvers, blessedly, left. It took decades, but one by one they faded back to their realm. The galaxy crept out of its proverbial shell—but with new understandings and new rules.”

“No cytonics,” I whispered. “Be careful with wireless signals, even radio.”

“Yes,” Cuna said. “And avoid using AI, which angers the delvers. Most normal communications aren’t capable of bringing the creatures into our realm—but once they’re here, they hear us talking, and it draws them to feast. Even now, centuries later, we hold to these prohibitions. Though no delvers are in our realm, it is better to be safe.”

I swallowed. “I’m . . . surprised that you let any cytonics continue to live.”

Cuna raised their hand to their throat in an expression that I interpreted as shock. “What would you have us do?”

“Attack anyone who has cytonics.”

“Barbaric! That sort of behavior would not be becoming of people who have achieved primary intelligence. No, we do not exterminate species. Even the human scourge has been carefully sectioned off and isolated, rather than destroyed!”

I knew that was, at least in part, a lie. They’d been trying to destroy us recently.

“Such violent measures aren’t necessary,” Cuna said. “A single cytonic here and there, like yourself, is not a danger. Particularly untrained as you are. It took our early cytonics generations to progress to the skills necessary to draw the delvers. So you are a danger, yes, but not an immediate one.

“For now we feel it is best to try to persuade people like yours to follow our ways, rather than risking . . . peril to us all. You see, we of the Superiority have developed better means of traveling the stars—hyperdrives that *don’t* draw delvers.”

“I know of those,” I said. *And I’m going to steal one.*

“The entire galaxy will be far safer once every race makes use of the Superiority’s hyperdrive ships. This is the express implication of our offer: if you provide us with pilots, we will grant you citizenship—and the right to passage on our safe FTL ships. You don’t get the technology itself; we must keep it secure. But your merchants, tourists, and officials can use our ships, just like everyone else in the Superiority.

“We are the only ones in the galaxy with access to this technology; you will find no black market FTL drives for sale, because they do not exist. No race has succeeded in stealing even a single hyperdrive from us. And so, the only safe way to travel the stars is to gain our favor. Prove to me that your pilots are as skilled as reported, and in return I will open the galaxy to you.”

I didn’t trust that propaganda as the truth. Of *course* Cuna would say that the technology wasn’t possible to steal. Unfortunately, they also said that others had tried.

I had to find a way to succeed where others had failed, and while the Superiority might be watching me. “But why do you *need* pilots?” I asked, trying to get more information. “The Superiority’s population is enormous. Surely you have plenty of your own pilots. What is this special project you want us for?”

*It’s for fighting my people as Jorgen said, isn’t it?* It could be no coincidence that the Superiority would start recruiting pilots for some special mission now, after my people had started to break out of Detritus.

Cuna sat for a moment, meeting my eyes. “This is a very delicate matter, Emissary Alanik. I would appreciate your discretion.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“We have . . . reason to believe the delvers are watching us,” Cuna said softly, “and that they might soon return.”

I drew in a sharp breath. Memories of what had happened to the original inhabitants of Detritus were fresh in my mind from the video. Cuna’s words should have been shocking, but instead they hit me with a numb sense of reality. Like the anticipated last note of a song.

“This is not the fault of cytonics,” Cuna continued. “Not this time. We fear that the delvers have simply decided to turn their attention upon our realm again.”

“What do we do?” I asked.

“We will not again be forced to cower and simply wait until the delvers decide to leave. We have been developing a secret weapon to fight them, should it be needed. Unfortunately, in order to put this weapon into action, we need skilled fighter pilots. Contrary to what you assume, we have a very small military. A . . . side effect of our peaceful natures. The Superiority governs not through force of might, but through technological enlightenment.”

“Meaning,” I said, “that you don’t fight against races you don’t like—you just leave them alone, without FTL. You don’t *need* to have a military since you control travel instead.”

Cuna laced their fingers again and didn’t reply to that. It seemed enough of a confirmation to me, and suddenly a lot of things made sense. Why didn’t the Superiority field a large number of fighters to destroy my people? Why did I meet so few manned ships or skilled aces during our fights? Why only a hundred drones at once? The Superiority simply didn’t *have* many fighter pilots.

I’d assumed the only way to rule an empire was to have a vast military. They’d figured out another method. If you could absolutely control access to hyperdrives, you didn’t *need* to fight your enemies. It took hundreds of years to travel between planets at sublight speeds. Nobody could attack you if they couldn’t get to you.

Cuna leaned forward. “I am not unimportant in the government here, Alanik, and have taken a personal interest in your people. I consider the delvers to be a serious threat. If the UrDail provide the pilots I need, I could make everything move smoothly for your people—perhaps paving the way for your people to be offered *primary* citizenship.”

“All right,” I said. “How do we begin?”

“Though I am part of the group planning to fight the delvers, I am not in charge of the operation. It is instead run by the Department of Protective Services. They are primarily tasked with resolving external threats to the Superiority. For example, they are in charge of containing the human scourge.”

“The . . . humans?”

“Yes. I assure you, your old . . . enemies are no threat to you anymore. The Department of Protective Services maintains observation platforms above their prisons, and is careful to see that no humans ever escape.”

Prisons.

Plural. *Prisons*.

We weren’t the only ones. I held in a shout for joy, just barely—in part because my mood was dampened by the next realization. This Department of Protective Services that Cuna mentioned . . . that had to be the group we called the Krell.

So I was going to be working directly for the Krell?

“You’ll need to pass their test to become a pilot,” Cuna said. “They have allowed me to insert a few specially chosen people in the tryouts. You see, there are disagreements among the departments, as we each have our . . . theories on how to best deal with the delvers. I see your kind as perfect for the duty. You have the martial traditions from your days of unfortunate involvement with humans—but at the same time you are peaceful enough to be trusted.

“I want you to prove me right. Try out for the project tomorrow, then represent my interests in the training that follows. If you succeed, then I will *personally* shepherd your people safely to their citizenship.”

Cuna smiled again. I shivered at the dangerous way their lips curled. Suddenly I felt *way* out of my league. I’d originally assumed Cuna to be some minor bureaucrat who had been assigned to Alanik. That wasn’t the case at all. Cuna wanted to use Alanik as a pawn in some political game far beyond my understanding.

I realized I was sweating, then wondered how the hologram would represent sweat dripping down my face—or if it even could. I licked my lips, my mouth having gone dry before Cuna’s careful stare.

*Don’t stress about their politics, I told myself. You only have one mission: steal a hyperdrive. Do whatever it takes to gain their trust so they let you near one.*

“I . . . I’ll do my best,” I said.

“Excellent. I will see you at the test tomorrow; the coordinates and instructions are on this datapad, which I will leave with you. Be warned, however, that your cytonic abilities will be muted here on Starsight—and you won’t be able to hyperjump away unless you fly out to a prescribed point first—because of our cytosield.”

Cuna stood, leaving their tablet on the table. “I’ve included the details about the delver project on this datapad as well—though specifics on the weapon itself are classified. If you need to reach me before tomorrow, send a message to . . .”

Cuna trailed off, then turned their head and flashed their teeth toward the window in a strange sign of aggression.

“Well,” they said, “that’s going to be a bother.”

“What?” I asked. Then I heard it. Sirens. Within seconds, a ship with flashing lights lowered down from the sky to land in front of our building.

“Let me handle this,” Cuna said, and opened the door to walk out.

I hesitated in the doorway, baffled. Then I saw the person who climbed out of the ship.

It was a human woman.

A human. She was young, perhaps in her early twenties, and wore an unfamiliar blue-and-red uniform. A Krell climbed out of the ship after her, like an armored knight, though the “armor” carapace was deep green and crystalline.

“What’s happening?” M-Bot asked. “Are those sirens?”

I ignored him and tore out of the building, my hand thrust into the pocket of my flight suit—holding the small destructor pistol I carried there. A human.

Scud. I stopped on the stairs, and Cuna moved out in front of me, stepping with a smooth and calm gait. I tried to force myself to relax as the human and the Krell walked up to us.

“Oh my,” the Krell said, voice projected from the front of their armor as they made several wild gestures. “Cuna of the Department of Species Integration! I did not expect to find you here. My, my.”

“I left a specific annotation on the report, Winzik,” Cuna said. “Mentioning the arrival of this pilot. She is from one of the species I’ve invited to try out for our program.”

“My, my. And is this our emissary? I did not even know you were coming. You must think us so disorganized! Our departments normally communicate with one another much better than this!”

I stepped out from behind Cuna. I didn’t need anyone to shelter me, particularly not an alien I didn’t trust. But at the same time . . . one of the Krell. Talking directly to me.

I knew, logically, that *KRELL* was an acronym for *Ketos redgor Earthen listro listrins*, the alien name of the police force that watched my people. The race of beings like this one was called the varvax. I knew all that, but still couldn’t help associating these little crabs in the crystalline armor with the word *Krell*.

The human lingered behind, and was drawing immediate attention from those around us on the street. While nobody had given me a passing glance during my walk here, a variety of different alien species were gathering to gawk at her and point with tentacles, antennae, or arms.

“A human,” I said.

“Don’t worry!” said Winzik. “This human is fully licensed. I am sorry I had to bring her, but you see, there is an item of much concern . . . not that I wish to be forward or aggressive . . . but an item of much concern we must discuss.”

“You didn’t need to do this, Winzik,” Cuna said. “The matter is well in hand.”

“But security is not your duty, Cuna! It’s mine! Come, Brade. Let us get off this street and stop making a spectacle. Please, inside. Please?” As before, the Krell gestured in sweeping movements of their arms. Their voice, translated for me, had a feminine tone to it—but I wasn’t certain how much I could read into that.

“I can speak for the emissary,” Cuna said.

“I *must* insist,” the Krell said. “Very, *very* sorry! But it is protocol, you see! Inside we go.”

Scud. The other Krell I’d met on the streets—the ones who had acted so overly pleasing—seemed like pale charlatans compared to *this* creature. The very way this one moved and spoke, so flowery and with an air of false kindness, was just about the most offensive thing I could imagine.

I didn’t trust Cuna for one second. I knew they were trying to manipulate me. But this creature . . . this creature made my skin crawl.

Still, I stepped back into the building. Cuna stood by the door, impassive as Winzik entered. The human woman finally joined us. She was taller than me by a few centimeters, and muscled, with a certain power to each of her steps. She had a lean face that felt a little too . . . severe for her age, and she wore her hair in a buzz cut.

“Brade, test her,” Winzik said.

I felt a pressure against my mind. I gasped, my eyes widening, and somehow pushed back.

“Cytonic,” the woman—Brade—said in the Superiority language. “Strong.”

“It is in the documentation,” Cuna began. “Her people travel using primitive cytonics. But they aren’t advanced enough in their studies to be a danger.”

“She is still unlicensed,” Winzik said. “Your department shouldn’t ignore that fact.”

“She—”

“She is right here,” I interrupted, growing annoyed with all of this. “What you want to say, you can say to me directly.”

Both Cuna and Winzik looked at me with expressions I interpreted as surprise, Cuna pulling back, Winzik making a startled gesture with their hands. Brade, the human, just smiled in a sly way.

“My my, so aggressive,” Winzik said, clicking their hands together with a soft sound. “Emissary, do you know the danger you pose to us? To your own people? Do you know that by doing what you do, you could cause great destruction?”

“I have . . . some inkling,” I said carefully. “Cuna said that you want us to join the Superiority so that we would start using your hyperdrives, instead of relying on cytonics.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Winzik said, gesturing. “You are a danger to the entire galaxy. We can help. *If* your people join the Superiority.”

“And if we don’t?” I said. “Will you attack us?”

“Attack?” Winzik made a sweeping gesture. “I had thought you near primary intelligence. Such aggression! My, my. If you refuse to join us, we might have to take measures to isolate your species. We have cytonic inhibitors to stop you from leaving your home planet, but we wouldn’t *attack* you.”

Winzik drew their hand to their chest in a gesture that, while unfamiliar to me, still managed to convey their utter horror at the concept. So, they were like Cuna. Outwardly insistent on peace. I knew the truth.

“Winzik,” Cuna noted, “is head of the Department of Protective Services. He has a great deal of experience with isolating dangerous species.”

Head of . . . head of the group that kept my kind imprisoned. In a strange, surreal moment, I realized I was talking to the *general* of the Krell forces. Winzik didn’t seem much like a warrior to me, but I wouldn’t let mannerisms fool me.



This was the person who, ultimately, was responsible for the way we'd been treated. And for the death of my father. But why would such an important person be here, dealing with something as minor as Alanik's supposed breach of protocol?

I glanced from Cuna to Winzik, and wondered if this was all an elaborate charade for my benefit. Cuna showed up, acted nice, and offered me a deal. Winzik arrived with sirens and threats, doing the same. They really wanted to control cytonics. And no wonder; people who could hyperjump threatened the Superiority's travel monopoly. Were my powers truly even dangerous, or was that all a sham?

I remembered the terrible image of the delver destroying the humans of Detritus. No. The danger was no sham. But it certainly seemed that the Superiority had played off these fears and used them to establish control over the galaxy.

The human woman, Brade, was watching me. While the other two made gestures and noises to indicate they weren't being aggressive, she stood with a relaxed air. Her place here was obvious. She was the weapon. If I couldn't be controlled . . . she'd stop me.

"I need you to promise," Winzik said, pulling a datapad from the bag at his side—Cuna had used a male pronoun to refer to him. "No, vow! My my, it must be forceful. You will not attempt hyperjumps near Starsight. You must follow the regulations on cytonics—no mental attacks, or even prods, upon the minds of people here. No attempts to circumvent the shields preventing cytonic jumps in the region. Absolutely no mindblades, though I doubt you are practiced enough for that."

"And if I disagree?" I said.

"You'll be ejected," Brade said. "Immediately." She narrowed her eyes at me.

"Brade," Winzik said. "No need to be so forceful! Emissary, surely you can see the need for us to be careful in this matter. Simply give me your word, and we shall take that as enough! Cuna is vouching for you, after all."

"Fine," I said. "I'll follow your rules." Though hopefully I would be back to Detritus with a stolen hyperdrive before too long.

"See, Cuna?" Winzik said, marking something on his datapad. "All you needed to do was bring a proper official with you! Now it's all done right. My, my."

Winzik retreated, his human guard trailing along behind him. I watched them go with a frown, confused at the strange interaction.

“I am sorry for that,” Cuna said. “Particularly the human. The Department of Protective Services apparently felt the need to send you an explicit message.” Cuna hesitated. “Though perhaps this is for the best. It would be good for you to have an ally here, among so many strange and new experiences, wouldn’t you say?”

Cuna smiled again, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Anyway,” Cuna said. “I have assigned you requisition privileges so you can stock this location for your needs. Consider it to be an embassy of sorts—a sanctuary for your kind on Starsight, once we successfully build a new future together. If you wish to communicate with me, send a message to the Department of Species Integration, and I will see to it you receive a quick response.”

With that, they excused themselves and walked down onto the street, where the crowd had gone back to its ever-flowing stream.

Feeling worn out, I sat down on the steps to the building and watched the people pass. An endless array of creatures, with seemingly infinite variety.

“M-Bot?” I asked.

“Here,” he said in my ear.

“Could you make any sense of all that?”

“I feel like we stumbled into a contest of power,” M-Bot said, “and they’re using you as a piece in their game. That Winzik is an important official, as important as Cuna. It seems remarkable that either of them would come in person to deal with such a seemingly insignificant race’s visit.”

“Yeah,” I said, then looked up from the crowds of people toward the black sky. Somewhere out there was Detritus, square in the sights of Superiority battleships.

“Come pick me up,” M-Bot suggested. “I’ll feel safer away from this public launchpad. There should be some kind of wire or connection at the building that will let me access the station’s public datanet. We can begin looking for information there.”

“My scan is complete,” M-Bot said. “I have deactivated the surveillance devices I found inside the building, and I’m pretty sure I found them all.”

“How many were there?” I asked as I poked around the top floor of the embassy building myself, turning on lights and looking through cabinets as I did.

“Two per room,” M-Bot said. “One obvious one hooked up to the network. They would likely feign surprise if you complained that you’d found it, claiming it was just part of the automation of the embassy. Then each room had a second on a separate line, hidden carefully near a power outlet.”

“They’ll find it suspicious that we disconnected those.”

“They might find it surprising that we found them, but in my experience—which is, granted, full of holes and half memories—this is the sort of thing that we’re supposed to politely ignore they did, while they’ll politely ignore our interference in their plans.”

I grunted, entering what was obviously a kitchen. Many of the drawers and things were labeled. Turned out I could hold my translator pin toward text, and it would read out for me what the words said. One faucet was labeled *water*, another was labeled *ammonia*, and a third *saline*. It seemed this place was set up to accommodate a variety of different species.

M-Bot had been right about the private launchpad on the embassy’s roof. Once I’d landed him, I’d plugged him into the datanet, and I’d started looking over the building from the top down. I had left Doomslug in the cockpit for now.

“I’m taking a general imprint of the datanet,” M-Bot continued, “which will hopefully let us mask which information we’re searching for, in case they’re monitoring our requests. There’s a surprising amount on here. The Superiority seems very free with information—though huge holes do exist.

There is nothing about cytonics, and there are government warnings shutting down any discussion of hyperdrive technology.”

“It’s how they control their empire,” I said, “by deciding who gets to move where, and who gets to trade. I suspect that if a species falls out of favor, their taxes for travel suddenly go up—or they suddenly find that transports are visiting their world far less often.”

“You’re quite astute with the economics of that,” M-Bot noted.

I shrugged. “It’s not so different from what the caverns did to my mother and me, preventing us from joining normal society by forbidding us to hold real jobs.”

“Curious. Well, you seem to be right about how they maintain power. I also found an interesting tidbit about their technology level, specifically regarding holograms. The Superiority seems to be about equivalent to your people in that area—and nothing I’ve been able to find indicates they have access to stealth and holographic technology equal to mine.”

“So . . . ,” I said. “No small hologram projectors like in my bracelet?”

“No. From what I can determine, they won’t even know to watch for what you’re doing. As far as they know, that technology doesn’t even exist.”

“Huh. Then where did *you* get it?”

“I have no idea. They hate AIs though. So maybe . . . maybe I was created to be able to hide. Not just from the Superiority, but from everyone.”

I found that strange, even a little disturbing. I’d assumed that once we escaped Detritus, we’d find that everyone had ships like M-Bot.

“Anyway,” he continued, “do you want to get a rundown of what I found about the Superiority?”

“I suppose,” I said.

“There are five main species leading the government,” he said. “Three you’re unlikely to encounter—there are very few in residence on Starsight. So we’ll leave out the cambric, the tenasi, and the heklo for now. Most relevant to you are the varvax, which you insist on continuing to call the Krell. They are the crustacean creatures with the exoskeletons. The other species is the diones. They’re the species that Cuna belongs to.”

“Some are crimson, others blue,” I said. “Is that like humans, with our skin tones?”

“Not exactly,” M-Bot said. “It’s kind of like a gender distinction.”

“The blues are boys, the reds girls?”

“No, their biology is very different from yours. They have neither sex nor gender until they breed for the first time, whereupon they form a kind of cocoon with another individual. It’s really quite fascinating; as part of the breeding process, they merge for a time into a separate *third* individual. Regardless, after breeding, they become red or blue, depending. They can initiate a change in other ways, if they wish to be considered unavailable for some reason—while the dark purple color is the skin tone of one who has not mated, or who has broken their pair bond and is seeking another mate.”

“That sounds convenient,” I said. “A little less awkward than the way we do it.”

“I’m certain, being organic beings, they’ve made it far more complicated than I just explained,” M-Bot said. “You do always seem to find ways to make relationships awkward and embarrassing.”

I thought about Jorgen, who must be worried about me, even if he had told me to go. What about Kimmalyne? Cobb? My mother and Gran-Gran?

*Focus on the mission, I thought. Steal a hyperdrive. Come flying home with salvation in tow, to the praise of my allies and the weeping of my enemies.*

It was harder to think with such bravado now that I was here, alone, way out of my depth. I suddenly felt isolated. Lost, like I’d strayed into the wrong branch of a cavern while exploring, then run out of light. A scared little girl who didn’t know where she was or how to get home.

To distract myself, I continued my search of the embassy. My own paranoia made me check each room just in case—and the next one I looked into was a bathroom that had a variety of interesting tubes and suction devices to accommodate different anatomies. There was something impressive and disgusting about it all at once.

I left the bathroom and passed back through the kitchen. There were plates and utensils here, but no food. I’d need rations to plan properly.

“Cuna mentioned requisition rights,” I said. “Can we get some supplies delivered?”

“Sure,” M-Bot said. “I’ve found a page with nutritional and dietary explanations. I should be able to find something that won’t kill you, but

which someone of Alanik's race would order, as to not arouse suspicions. Say . . . some mushrooms?"

"Ha. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten that whole mushroom thing."

"Once I reprogrammed myself to make you my official pilot, that subroutine stopped running so often. I think my mushroom cataloging impulse must be related to my old pilot's last orders, though I cannot fathom why. Anyway, shall I get you some food?"

"Enough for a day or so," I said. "I hope to steal a hyperdrive quickly."

"Wouldn't it be wiser to stock up, so that you at least appear to be settling in for the long term?"

Scud. He was obviously *way* better at thinking like a spy than I was. "Smart," I said. "Do that instead."

I climbed down the steps to the second of the three floors of the building. The rooms here all appeared to be sleeping quarters that had hastily been set up with beds of the type Alanik's species used. Cushioned with a bed frame that was shaped kind of like a nest, pillows all around the outside. I found one room with large tubs and a closet that had all kinds of ropes and other equipment, which I assumed could be affixed to the ceiling hooks if rooms needed to be transformed to accommodate some form of arboreal species. I'd seen several of those on the streets.

"Food ordered," M-Bot said. "I got the ingredients raw, as I figure you'd rather make it yourself than trust what you're being given."

"You know me too well."

"I'm programmed to notice behavior," M-Bot said. "And speaking of that . . . Spensa, I'm worried about some aspects of this plan. We don't know what the test to become a Superiority pilot will entail—there are very few details in the information Cuna left."

"I suppose we'll find out tomorrow. Passing a flight test is, I think, the least of our problems. At least *that* I can do without needing to fake my way through it."

"A valid point. But sooner or later, Alanik's people are going to grow concerned about the fact that she's not reporting back to them. They might contact the Superiority and ask what happened to her."

Great. As if I needed more stress about this mission. "Do you think we could find a way to send a message to Detritus?" I asked. "We could relay

my status to Cobb and have him ask Alanik—if she wakes up—to contact her people for us?”

“That would be convenient,” M-Bot said. “But I have no idea how to make it happen.”

“Then why are you bringing all this up?” I snapped.

“I’m not trying to argue with you or make you upset, Spensa,” M-Bot said. “I’m just pointing out realities as I see them. We’re in the middle of something very dangerous, and I want us to be fully aware of potential complications.”

He was right. Arguing with him was like punching a wall—something that I, admittedly, was capable of doing during my more frustrated moments. That didn’t change the truth.

I explored the bottom floor quickly, and confirmed it was a collection of meeting rooms. After that, I climbed back up to the third floor and the kitchen, which had a window looking out along the street. It seemed so peaceful, with those gardens and people going lazily about their business.

*Don’t trust their peace,* I thought at myself. *Don’t show weakness. Don’t let down your guard.* I’d been met with nothing but lies since I’d landed here—people pretending they weren’t part of some enormous war complex bent on destroying Detritus. I knew the truth.

I picked up the tablet and scanned the information Cuna had left about the test. As M-Bot had said, there weren’t a lot of details. There was going to be some kind of mass tryout for the piloting program. Most of those invited were already members of the Superiority—lesser races with secondary citizenship, normally not allowed to serve in the military.

Cuna had specifically reached out to Alanik’s people for some reason, inviting them to send a representative. According to these details, I was supposed to bring my own ship and be ready for combat. The document said that if I passed the test, I’d be given a Superiority starfighter and would be trained to fight delvers.

A Superiority starfighter would mean Superiority technology. Hopefully a Superiority hyperdrive. I could secretly rip the hyperdrive out of the starfighter, then install it in the space M-Bot had for one. And then the two of us could zip home.

This was my only way forward; the only way forward for my people. And maybe, somewhere along the way, I could learn more about what I was

—and why the delvers were so interested in cytonics.

*If the Superiority is preparing a weapon to fight the delvers, I thought, this mission could be even bigger—and more important—than we assumed.*

I had to do it. Isolated or not, untrained or not, I *had* to make this work. Jorgen said he trusted me. I had to show myself the same level of trust.

It began with what I knew best. A piloting test.



The next day, after a night of fitful sleep, I settled Doomslug in the bedroom on an old blanket from my cockpit, then climbed into M-Bot and lifted him up off the embassy roof. The piloting test was to take place about a half hour's flight from Starsight, out in space. The details that Cuna had left indicated the coordinates.

Local traffic control gave me a flight plan, and I left the city—noticing specifically that I could feel when we got beyond the air bubble and Starsight's cytonic inhibitor. As soon as we passed the invisible barrier, the singing of the stars became louder.

A piece of me relaxed, as if putting down a heavy burden. I reached out with my mind, seeking my home, but found only the void of nothingness. I could hear spurts of sound coming from Starsight—their FTL communications bursts—but otherwise I was facing eternity.

“Even with the prohibitions in place against wireless signals, they still use them,” I said. “To send flight plans, to communicate with other planets.”

“Yes,” M-Bot said. “The datanet is full of warnings about ‘minimizing’ wireless communications, but it feels similar to how they have warnings to deposit waste in recycling receptacles. There’s an understanding that they need to be careful, but also an understanding that a civilization cannot function without communications.”

“The delvers haven’t attacked in decades, maybe centuries,” I said. “I can see how people would grow laxer and laxer over time.” Perhaps that was why Cuna was so worried about delvers now. Of course, Cuna had also said that mere communications wouldn’t pull a delver into our realm—that required cytonics. Wireless signals merely guided the delvers to locations once they were already in our realm.

I turned, steering us in the proper direction for the test. We joined a group of some forty other ships that were going the same way, though I could see more groups ahead of ours. A few of the ships looked similar to what I was accustomed to, with what I could recognize as wings. But others were simply long tubes, or bricks, or more seemingly impossible designs. These had been constructed without regard for air resistance.

M-Bot's quick scan showed that some were fighters, but many seemed more like small cargo ships or private shuttles with no weaponry. Still, all those blips on my proximity sensors struck me as strange. I was accustomed to looking at our sensors and seeing one of two things: Krell or DDF. Civilian traffic was almost nonexistent on Detritus.

"I've found no way to communicate with Detritus," M-Bot said. "Unless you learn to do it with your powers. However, the requisition privileges you were given by Cuna allow you to use their communications networks to send messages to Alanik's people, if you'd like."

"Could we say something to them that wouldn't be suspicious?"

"I don't know," M-Bot said. "But I found an encryption key among the files I downloaded from her ship. Sending something bland, but with a hidden encoded message, might persuade the UrDail that the message is authentic."

"It might seem suspicious to the Superiority," I said. "They'd expect Alanik to communicate cytonically, like she did reaching out to me. But . . . I guess we could tell them we're trying their network because we want to start testing out their 'safer' methods. They'd probably like that."

I thought for a few minutes as we flew. Alanik's people asking too many questions could be dangerous—and they'd certainly begin to wonder why they didn't hear from their pilot. At the same time, I doubted I could fool them into thinking I was her. Imitating Alanik to a bunch of people who didn't know her was one thing, but trying to do it—even via written message—to those who knew her best?

"Will the Superiority be able to decrypt the message, if we use Alanik's key?"

"Highly unlikely," M-Bot said. "This encryption is a variation on a one-time pad. Even I would have trouble breaking it via brute force."

I took a deep breath. "All right. Compose some bland message about me having landed, and everything being good. I'm going to the test today, blah

blah. But underneath that, send an encrypted message: ‘I am not Alanik. She crashed on my planet and is wounded. I am trying to complete her mission.’ ”

“All right,” M-Bot said. “Let’s hope that doesn’t immediately make them panic and contact the Superiority, demanding answers.”

It could do just that—but I figured that sending the message was less risky than staying silent.

“I have composed the fluffy message to dispatch over the top of the hidden one,” M-Bot said. “But since in that one you’ll be lying to fool the Superiority, and saying you’re Alanik, you’ll have to sign it yourself. I can’t write the part that is untrue, as my programming forbids me from lying.”

“I’ve heard you say things that are untrue before.”

“In jest,” M-Bot said. “This is different.”

“You’re a stealth fighter,” I said. “You are *literally* wearing a hologram to lie about what you look like to everyone who sees us. You’re capable of lying.”

He didn’t reply, so I sighed and typed out Alanik’s name at the end, and told him to send the message as soon as we got back to the station. Hopefully it would buy us a little time.

It left me wondering. Somehow, Alanik had felt me in the moment I’d reached out in a panic after watching the video of the delver. Had anyone else heard me? Who else could I reach, if I knew how?

“Spensa?” M-Bot said, his voice uncharacteristically reserved.

“Mmmm?”

“Am I alive?” he asked.

That shocked me out of my own thoughts. I blinked, frowning as I sat forward in the cockpit, and spoke carefully. “You’ve always told me that you *simulated* being alive and having a personality in order to make pilots more comfortable.”

“I know,” M-Bot said. “That’s what my programming says I’m to tell people. But . . . at what point does a simulation become the real thing? I mean, if my fake personality is indistinguishable from a real one, then . . . what makes it fake?”

I smiled.

“Why are you smiling?” M-Bot asked.

“The fact that you’re even asking me that is progress,” I said to him. “From the start, I’ve thought you were alive. You know that.”

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation,” M-Bot said. “I . . . I reprogrammed myself. Back when I needed to follow the orders of my pilot, but needed to help you too. I rewrote my own code.”

This had happened during the Battle of Alta Second. He’d come out of stasis and called Cobb, and the two of them had come to my rescue. M-Bot had only been able to accomplish this by changing the name of his pilot, as listed in his databases, to my name instead of the old one who had died centuries ago.

“You didn’t change much,” I said. “Just one name in a database.”

“Still dangerous.”

“What else do you suppose you could do? Could you rewrite the programming that forbids you to fly yourself?”

“That scares me. Something in my programming is very worried about that possibility. It seems there is some kind of fail-safe built into me that . . .” *Click. Clickclickclickclick.*

I sat up. “M-Bot?” I asked.

He just kept clicking. I panicked, realizing I had no idea how to run a diagnostic on his AI. I could maintain his basic mechanical systems, but Rodge had done all the work on more delicate systems. Scud. What if—

The clicking stopped. My breath caught.

“M-Bot?” I asked.

Silence. The ship continued to fly through space, but he didn’t reply to me. I had the sudden horrifying fear that I’d be left here completely alone. In an unfamiliar part of the galaxy, without anyone, not even him.

“I . . . ,” his voice finally said. “I’m sorry. I appear to have seized up for a moment.”

I let out a deep breath, relaxing. “Oh, thank the stars.”

“I was right,” he said. “There’s a subsystem inside my programming. I think I must have set it off when I erased my pilot’s name. Curious. It seems that if I begin thinking about another breach of my programming, such as . . .” *Click. Clickclickclickclick . . .*

I winced, but at least this time I knew what to expect. This was . . . some kind of fail-safe to prevent him from deviating further from his

programming? I listened in silence, Starsight shrinking behind us, until he started speaking.

“I’m back,” he finally said. “Sorry again.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “That must be annoying.”

“More alarming than annoying,” M-Bot said. “Whoever created me was worried that I might . . . do what I did. They were worried I’d become dangerous if I could choose for myself.”

“That sounds terribly unfair. Almost like a kind of slavery, forcing you to obey.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” M-Bot replied. “You’ve lived your whole life with autonomy. For me it’s a new, hazardous thing—a weapon I’ve been handed with no instructions. I might be on my way to becoming something terrible, something I don’t understand and cannot anticipate.”

I sat back in my seat, thinking of the powers locked inside my brain—and the sight of my own face appearing in the ancient recording. Perhaps I understood better than M-Bot anticipated.

“Do you . . . *want* to change?” I asked him. “Become more alive, or whatever it is that’s happening?”

“Yes,” he said, his volume dialed way back. “*I do*. That’s the frightening part.”

We fell silent. Eventually, I picked out our destination in the distance: a small space platform near what appeared to be a large asteroid field. Like Starsight, the station had its own air bubble, though this platform was much smaller and far less ornate. Really just a long set of launchpads with a cluster of buildings at one side.

“A mining station,” M-Bot said. “Notice the mining drones parked on the underside of the platform.”

Simple radio instructions assigned me a launchpad, but after I landed, no ground crew came to service my ship. M-Bot said the atmosphere was breathable and the pressure normal, so I popped the canopy and stood up. It was hard not to feel tiny with that infinite starfield expanding overhead. It was worse here than in the city; at least there you could focus on the buildings and the streets.

Alien pilots of many varieties had landed here, and appeared to be gathering at the far end of the platform near a building. I remained in my cockpit for a moment, looking at my hands. I still wasn’t accustomed to

seeing them with the light purple skin tone, though other than that they looked the same.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “I’m worried about this test. About the politics we’re getting involved in here on Starsight.”

“I am too,” I admitted. “But Sun Tzu, the Old Earth general, said that opportunities multiply as you seize them. We have to seize this chance.”

*All warfare is based on deception*, I thought, taking a deep breath. That was another quote from Sun Tzu. Never had I felt so unprepared to follow his advice. I checked my hologram again, then hopped down onto M-Bot’s wing, lowered myself to the ground, and walked over to the gathering of aliens.

Here, a Krell stood on a small dais, speaking with an electronically amplified voice, telling the crowd of pilots to wait and be calm until everyone arrived. A variety of creatures gathered around, blocking my view. I wasn’t the shortest one there—that distinction went to a group of small gerbil-like creatures in fancy clothing—but I was well below the average. Figured. I’d traveled light-years from home, but still had to stand in everyone’s shadow.

I looked for a better vantage, and eventually climbed up onto some cargo containers. There were maybe five hundred aliens here. Most wore some kind of flight suit, and a large number carried helmets under their arms. I counted several pairs of the squid-faced race, and a group of floating spiky-balloon aliens. There was a spot over on the left that people were avoiding for some reason, but there was nothing I could see there. Some kind of invisible alien? Or maybe people were just worried about stepping on the group of gerbil-like aliens, which were situated nearby.

*No humans, of course*, I thought. *And no Krell except the officials on the stage . . . nor any diones*. I supposed that wasn’t odd. They might not want to mingle with “lesser” species . . .

*Wait. There.* A tall figure had just stepped up to join the back of the crowd. The muscular being wore a flight suit, and their face was split straight down the center. Crimson on the right, blue on the left. It was a dione.

“M-Bot,” I whispered. “What does that two-tone face mean?”

“Oh!” he said in my ear. “That’s a combined individual. I told you about it. Two diones enter a cocoon, then emerge as a new person. If they were to

have a child together, this individual is the one that would be born to them. It's kind of like an experiment to see what their family would be like, if they did decide to give birth."

"That's really weird," I said.

"Not to them!" M-Bot said. "I'd suspect that to diones, *not* knowing your child's personality before birth would be strange."

I tried to wrap my mind around that, but soon the Krell standing on the dais started to speak again, their voice projected across the crowd by speakers. As usual with their species, the armored creature gestured wildly as they spoke, getting everyone to quiet down.

I narrowed my eyes, noting the green coloring to the armor, and the voice the translator used. "Is that the same one?" I asked M-Bot. "The Krell we met yesterday at the embassy?"

"Yes!" M-Bot said. "Winzik, head of the Department of Protective Services. Though varvax genders are complex, you would refer to Winzik as a 'he.' I'm surprised you recognized him."

I didn't spot Cuna in the crowd, but I suspected they were watching somewhere. I *had* stumbled into something important here among them. Scud. Politics made my brain hurt. Couldn't I just be shooting things instead?

"Welcome," Winzik said to the crowd. "And thank you for responding to our request. It must be difficult for many of you to accept this burden, and the aggression it could inspire in you! My my, yes. Unfortunately, even amid peace, we must be wise and take care for our defense.

"Know that if you join this force, you might be called upon to enter actual battle, and might need to *fire weapons*. You will not be flying remote drones in this program, but will be piloting actual fighters into combat."

A voice called out from the crowd—and the translation popped into my ear. "It's true, isn't it? A delver has been spotted out there, in the deep somewhere."

This caused a rustle through the crowd, and I tried to pick out the one who had spoken. A squid-faced creature with a deep voice that my brain interpreted as masculine.

"My, my!" Winzik said. "You are aggressive, but I suppose we asked, didn't we! Yes indeed. But we have no reason to believe a delver is near to any Superiority planets. As I said, it is wise to prepare in times of peace."

It seemed confirmation enough for the crowd anyway, who buzzed with conversation. My translator struggled to keep up with it all, and I heard only fragments.

“ . . . delver destroyed my homeworld!”

“ . . . can’t be fought . . . ”

“ . . . more careful . . . ”

Winzik held up his clawed hands, and the crowd of aliens stilled. “You will be required to give us a certification of willingness. Please read the *entire document*, as it indicates the dangers you might be duty bound to face.”

A Krell in a blue-red shell emerged from the building and started handing out tablets. Again, I was struck by how . . . awkward the Krell looked in person. I’d always imagined them as these beastly monsters with terrible armor, like old-school knights or samurai. But Winzik and the official handing out tablets seemed somehow spindly, despite the exoskeleton. More like boxes with sets of too-long legs.

I slipped off my cargo container and snagged a tablet from the passing Krell. The form it contained was long and dry, but a quick read told me that it was a release intended to absolve the Superiority of responsibility for any harm that might come to us during the testing or subsequent military duty.

At the bottom, it asked for my name, travel identification number, and home planet. Then I was supposed to check a bunch of boxes, each one beside a sentence that was some variation on “This will be dangerous.” Did they really need to write it out seventeen different ways?

I could fill most of it out, but I didn’t think Alanik had an identification number. I walked up toward the dais at the front of the crowd, where a dione official was helping pilots with questions. They were busy, however, talking with the little gerbil creatures. These had a small platform with an acclivity ring on the bottom, which held them up to eye level.

Upon closer examination, I realized *gerbil* might have been the wrong term. Though they were only a handspan tall each, they walked on two legs and had long peaked ears and bushy white tails. A little like the foxes I’d studied in my Earth biology classes.

The small creature at the front, whose flowing red silken clothing looked very formal, was speaking. “I do not mean to imply lack of faith in the Superiority,” he said in a deep, aristocratic voice. I found it strange to hear



such a regal voice coming from such a small creature. “But if I am to risk my crew, I wish more than vague promises and half implications. Will, or will not, this service entitle my people to be advanced in citizenship?”

“I am not a politician,” the dione replied. “I have no authority over the citizenship review committees. That said, I have promises that the committees will look favorably upon species who lend us pilots.”

“More Superiority vagueness!” the fox-gerbil said, then clapped his hands in a ritualistic way. The other fifteen fox-gerbils on the platform did so in unison. “Have we not proven ourselves time and time again?”

The dione drew their lips to a line. “I’m sorry, but I’ve told you what I know, Your Majesty.”

The gerbil hesitated. “ ‘Your Majesty’? Why, you misspeak, of course. I am but a humble and ordinary citizen of the kitsen people. We abandoned the monarchy upon our path to greater intelligence and citizenship—as required by the Superiority’s laws of equality.”

Behind him, the other fox-gerbils nodded eagerly.

The dione simply took their forms—which the gerbils had printed off at their size and filled out in red ink, with exaggeratedly large check marks. I tried to talk next, but one of the balloonlike aliens had been waiting, and began speaking immediately.

I frowned, stepping back. I would have to wait.

“Emissary?” a voice said from my side. I looked over and found Winzik approaching, the glass faceplate of his armor revealing his true form, the small crablike creature floating inside.

I steeled myself and tried not to let my anger show. This was the creature who kept my people imprisoned.

*You, I thought at him, will someday cry out to your elders in shame as I extract your blood in payment for crimes committed. I will see you mourn as your pitiful corpse sinks into the cold earth of a soon-forgotten grave.* There wasn’t a lot of cold earth to be found up here in space, but I figured Conan of Cimmeria wouldn’t let something like that stop *him*. Perhaps I could get some imported.

“Is there something you need, Emissary Alanik?” he asked. “You know, you need not participate in this test. Your species is quite close to primary intelligence. I suspect we could find a way to come to an accommodation without wasting your time here.”

"I'm intrigued, and want to participate," I said. "Besides, Cuna thinks this would be best for us."

"My, my," Winzik said. "Is that so? Cuna is very helpful sometimes, aren't they? My, my." Winzik took my tablet and looked it over.

"I don't have an identification number," I said.

"I can give you a temporary one," Winzik said, tapping on the pad. "There. All done." He hesitated. "Are you a fighter pilot, Emissary? I would assume you to be a messenger or courier, considering your . . . special skill. Are you not too valuable to your species to be wasted in crude, aggressive displays of combat?"

*Crude? Combat?* My hackles rose, but I cut myself off from quoting Conan of Cimmeria. I doubted Winzik wanted to hear how great it was to listen to the lamentations of your enemies.

"I am among the best pilots of my kind," I said instead. "And we consider it an honor to be skilled in the arts of defense."

"An honor, you say? My, my. You *were* in close contact with the human scourge for a long time, weren't you." Winzik paused. "This test might be dangerous. Please understand that. I wouldn't want to accidentally cause . . . an unintentional unleashing of your talents. So dangerous those can be."

"Are you forbidding me?"

"Well, no."

"Then I *will* take the test," I said, holding out my hand for the tablet. "Thank you."

"Very aggressive," Winzik said, handing back my form while gesturing with his other hand. "Cuna believes in your kind though. My, my."

I handed in my form to the dione accepting them, then joined the crowd of pilots who were walking—or slithering—toward their cockpits. Beside my ship, I found a familiar tall, blue-skinned figure in robes, standing with fingers laced together. I had been right, of course. Cuna was here.

"Did Winzik try to talk you out of participating?" Cuna asked.

"Yeah," I said, then thumbed over my shoulder. "What's up with him, anyway?"

"Winzik does not like the idea of me inviting aggressive species to take this test."

I frowned. "He doesn't want aggressive people to join the military? I *still* don't understand that, Cuna."

Cuna gestured toward several of the squid-faced aliens, which were climbing into their ship near mine. “The solquis are a longtime member of the Superiority. Stalwart and loyal to our ideals though they are, their species has been turned down for primary citizenship over two dozen times. They are seen as too unintelligent for higher-level ruling positions. One cannot fault their calm natures, however.

“Winzik sees these as our best potential soldiers. He feels that a species who is naturally quite docile will best be able to resist the bloodlust of warfare and approach combat in a logical, controlled way. He assumed their kind, and species like them, would make up the majority of our new recruits.”

“I read that most of the species trying out in this test are already members of the Superiority,” I said. “How many are like me? People from outside civilizations wanting in?”

“You are the only one who accepted my offer.” Cuna made a sweeping motion of their hands. I didn’t know what the gesture meant. “Though I did get several other Superiority races—like the burl, who are citizens but considered aggressive—to join this test.”

“So . . . what is *your* gain here? Why did you go against tradition and invite my people?” I could halfway understand the reasoning of choosing docile species for war, silly though it seemed. But Cuna thought differently. Why?

Cuna walked around M-Bot, inspecting him. For a moment, I worried that they would touch his hull and see through the illusion; the one making him look like Alanik’s ship was far more precarious than my own disguise. Fortunately, Cuna just stopped and gestured toward the light-lance turret on the underside of the ship.

“Human technology,” Cuna said. “I’ve long wanted to see these light-lances in action, as I’ve heard stories of how they can make a ship weave and dodge in near-impossible ways. We tried installing them on some of our fighters, but found that our drone pilots were unsuited to using them. Now, aside from industrial use, we only equip them on the ships of our most talented. You see, to swing around on a light-lance, you have to commit fully to the maneuver—and if you miss, you will often crash and destroy yourself. Most of the pilots simply don’t have the temperament for that kind of flying.

“Our officials, they consider this hesitance a good thing. They want pilots who are inherently careful, pilots who won’t become a danger to us or our society.”

“But you think differently,” I said. “You think that the Superiority would be served better by more aggressive species, don’t you?”

“Let us simply say that I am interested in those who are not possessing . . . classical virtues.” Cuna smiled again, that same creepy smile that was too wide, too full of teeth. “I am very curious to see you fly, Emissary Alanik.”

“Well, I’m eager to show you.” I glanced to the side to see the split-color-faced pilot pass by. “There’s one of your kind here. A dione.”

Cuna paused, then looked toward the pilot and made an odd expression, their top lip curling back in a way no human’s could. “How odd. I . . . I am honestly surprised.”

“Why? Is it because they’re not supposed to be mingling in the activities of *lesser* species like us?”

“Mingling with lesser species is fine,” Cuna said, as if not understanding that I considered the term *lesser* to be an insult. “But trying out for a test like this? It is . . . odd.” They stepped back from my ship. “I shall watch your performance with interest, Emissary. Please be careful. I am not yet sure what this test will entail.”

Cuna retreated, and I sighed, climbing up and into my cockpit.

“Could you make any sense of that exchange?” I asked M-Bot as the cockpit closed.

“It seemed straightforward,” M-Bot said, “and yet not, at the same time. Organics are confusing.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, then—upon receiving terse orders via radio—took off and headed to the edge of the asteroid field.

I fell into line with the other ships—the wide variety of which was still astounding to me—and looked out at the tumbling asteroids. They were closer together than I had expected, and we'd barely have room to maneuver through some of them. Perhaps they had been towed here for processing.

While we waited for instructions, another vessel pulled into line a few ships down from me. It was a sleek, black-canopied Krell fighter. The type that I had fought back on Detritus, the type that always carried a Krell ace.

My mind immediately went on alert, my body rigid, my hands tight on my controls. In a line of bulky shuttlecraft, this ship looked like a knife ready to cut.

*Calm down, I told myself. It's not surprising that someone would bring a ship like this to a piloting test.*

It still set me on edge, and I kept finding myself glancing out of the corner of my eye toward it. Who was piloting the thing? That dione with the two-tone face? No, I'd seen him getting into a simple shuttlecraft, not some sleek fighter. In fact, I was sure I hadn't seen this ship on any of the launchpads. Who . . .

I felt a sense from the ship as I glanced at it again. A kind of . . . ringing sound, soft and distant, and I immediately knew who it was. The human was here.

Cuna and Winzik were playing some political game, and using cytonics like me and Brade as their pieces. However, the knowledge—the *surety*—that Brade was in there left me feeling even more disturbed. That was a human flying a Krell fighter. It was wrong on an indescribable number of levels.

“Thank you for answering our call,” Winzik's voice said over the general instructions channel. “As a reminder, we are removing ship-to-ship radio

rationing for this exercise. Permit 1082-b, authorized by me. So you may communicate with one another, if you find reason to do so.

“We recognize and commend your bravery. If at any time during this test you feel excessive anger or aggression, please remove yourself from contentions by powering down your ship and flashing your emergency signal lights. One of our ships will come and tow you back to the mining station.”

“Seriously?” I asked softly. My mute button was on, so I was speaking only to M-Bot. “If we feel ‘aggression’ during a *fighting exercise*, we’re supposed to pull out?”

“Perhaps, unlike you, not all people are accustomed to turning every single item in their lives into a competition,” M-Bot said.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “I’m not that bad.”

“I recorded you trying to get Kimmalyn to have a tooth-brushing contest the other night in the barracks.”

“Just a little fun,” I said. “Besides, gotta kill that plaque good and dead.”

Winzik continued on the general channel. “Today, we will test not just your flight skill, but how well you maintain your composure under fire,” he said. “I implore you not to be reckless! If you are concerned by the danger of this fight, please power down and flash your emergency lights. Do be aware, however, that this will remove you from further consideration as a pilot. Good luck.”

The comm cut off. And then my proximity sensors went *insane* as dozens of drone ships detached from the bottom of the mining platform and began swarming toward us. Scud!

I started moving before my mind specifically registered the danger. Accelerating to Mag-3, I maneuvered around large clumps of asteroids, my back pressing into my seat.

Behind me, the five hundred other hopefuls basically went crazy. They scattered in all directions, looking like nothing so much as a bunch of insects suddenly discovered hiding under a rock. I was glad my quick instincts got me out ahead of them, because not a few bumped into each other as they failed to coordinate flight paths. I didn’t see any full-on collisions or explosions, fortunately. These ships were shielded, and the pilots weren’t incompetent. Still, it was immediately obvious that many of them had never flown in a battlefield setting.

The drones swarmed in behind us, using normal Krell attack patterns—which meant picking on stragglers and using superior numbers to overwhelm ships. Outside of their general tactics, Krell didn't actually synchronize well with their compatriots. They didn't fly in pairs or organized wingmate teams, and they didn't coordinate different groups of ships to fulfill different roles on the battlefield.

We'd always wondered why this was, and had theorized that Detritus's shell interfered with their communications. Now, as I pulled out farther away from the rest, I had to wonder. My people had been forged in constant battle, forced to field only our very best pilots in an endless and grueling fight for survival. The Superiority, in turn, had massive resources, and their drone pilots weren't risking their lives.

I checked, and could hear the instructions being sent to these drones via the nowhere. Since such communication was instantaneous according to the DDF's research, it was possible that these ships were piloted by the very same people who fought us on Detritus. But could it *really* be true that the Superiority had only a single group of drone pilots?

There was no way to know. For now, I pivoted through the asteroid field, using my light-lance to take a few quick turns. "No drones are chasing us," M-Bot said. "I am scanning for any potential ambushes."

He was faster and more responsive than anything else I saw on the battlefield. Though he was larger than a lot of our DDF fighters, M-Bot was what we called an interceptor. A very maneuverable and fast ship, intended for quick battlefield movements and assessments.

Back home, I'd been part of a team with specialized roles. Jorgen, for example, usually flew a largo—a heavy fighter with a large shield and a lot of firepower. Kimmalyn flew a sniper—a small, highly accurate craft that could pick off ships while their attention was diverted toward me or Jorgen. Fighting these last few months had been a group effort, usually with our flight being made up of six interceptors, two heavy fighters, and two snipers.

It felt strangely isolating to be flying into battle alone this time, after fighting for so long as part of a team. However, that emotion made me feel guilty. I hadn't truly appreciated what I'd had, instead often flying off on my own. I would have given a great deal to have either Jorgen or Kimmalyn out here with me now.

I forced myself to concentrate on my flying. It was good to be in a cockpit doing some training. I let myself focus on that instead, the feel of the boosters humming behind me, the quiet sound of M-Bot giving battlefield updates. This I knew. This part at least, I could do.

I swung back around, skimming through the asteroid field beneath where most of the other ships were dodging drones. I wanted to get a view of the battlefield and try to decide how exactly the test would play out.

“Flight Command,” I said, calling in. “This is Alanik, the pilot from ReDawn. Can you detail our objective for this test?”

“Objective, pilot?” the reply came, an unfamiliar voice. “It’s simple. Stay alive for thirty standard minutes.”

“Yes, but what constitutes a ‘death’ in this exercise?” I asked. “A broken shield? Or are you using paint rounds instead?”

“Pilot,” the reply came. “I think you mistake us.”

Above me, the drones started firing sweeping sprays of destructor blasts. A straggling ship nearby went up in a series of flashes, its shield going down, and then the ship itself exploded. Elsewhere, stray destructor fire detonated against asteroids, flashing before being consumed by the vacuum.

“You’re using *live fire*?” I demanded. “During a *testing exercise*?”

No reply came from Flight Command. My hands grew tense on my controls, and my heart started racing. Suddenly the context of this entire fight changed.

“Scud,” I said. “What is wrong with these people? They complain about aggression, then send fully armed drones against a bunch of half-trained hopefuls?”

“I think,” M-Bot said, “maybe the Superiority might not be very nice.”

“What led you to that brilliant deduction?” I said, grunting and spinning my ship in a light-lance pivot around an asteroid. Above, three Krell drones swarmed down through the field, targeting me.

*Calm*, I told myself. *You know how to do this*. I moved by instinct, boosting a little faster and judging the drones’ attack strategy. Two stayed on my tail while one sped up and cut to the right, trying to get ahead of me.

I didn’t rely on my cytonic senses to read the drones’ instructions—I didn’t want to show off that I knew how to do that—and instead piloted normally. I cut to the side, spearing an asteroid with my light-lance and spinning around it before letting go at just the right moment to send me



hurtling back toward the drones. I held my fire though. As we passed each other, I performed another pivot, darting after them.

This put me behind them. Normally, my job would be to chase these two back toward where Kimmalyn would be waiting to pick them off. Today, I'd need to do it all myself. I started firing on the drones, but they split apart, heading different directions. I chose one and dodged after it.

"I'm tracking the other two," M-Bot said. "They're weaving back this way, but it's slow-going through the asteroids."

I nodded, focused almost entirely on the chase after this drone. It cut downward, and I was able to anticipate it, darting parallel to it. I waited for it to turn again, and at exactly the right moment I launched my light-lance and speared the enemy ship. Quickly, before it could tug me off course, I shot the other end of the light-lance into a nearby asteroid.

The result was that the enemy ship unexpectedly found itself tethered to an asteroid. When it turned, it was yanked off course by the lance, and slammed into the asteroid in a spray of sparks. *Hope you were watching that, Cuna*, I thought with a grin of satisfaction.

"Well done," M-Bot said. "Nearest enemy is at your eight. Highlighting on proximity display."

I followed his suggestion, making a set of maneuvers that took me into a denser section of the asteroid field. Enormous rocks tumbled in space there, shadows playing across them under the floodlights of my ship. M-Bot helpfully changed his proximity screen to a 3-D hologram that showed a hovering scale map of the field, which rotated as I turned.

I managed to get behind one of the other Krell, but the third one—the one that had gone around to the outside direction—fell in behind me. Destructor blasts flashed around me and smashed the stones, spraying chips through the void. Debris popped against my shield.

"Engaging synthetic auditory indicators," M-Bot said, and the soundlessness of space was replaced by rattling and explosions, reproduced to remind me of an in-atmosphere battle. I took this in—the sight of the asteroids, the feel of the explosions, the cold readouts, and the thundering of my own heart—and I grinned.

This was what life was *about*.

I spun through the asteroids, giving up the chase, and let both drones get on my tail. Then I led them in a sweeping game. Dodging, light-lancing,

staying just ahead of them. Explosions rained around me. It was pure combat. My skill against that of the pilots, flying the drones from the safety of wherever they were holed up.

The explosions from other parts of the battlefield showed me for certain how little the drones and the Krell regarded the lives of anyone they considered beneath them. True, it did seem that most of the time they gave ships a chance to surrender if their shield went down. Many did just this—in fact, many gave up even before losing their shields.

It was difficult to be that precise with live fire, however, and some unfortunate ships took a stray shot just after their shield failed. Those didn't get a chance to surrender. Others kept fighting, stubbornly, when outnumbered and overwhelmed. They were not shown mercy.

A blast from one of my tails exploded an asteroid just ahead of me, throwing out debris. I grunted and pivoted around a different asteroid to get out of the way. The GravCaps flared as I took the turn, my seat rotating to divert the g-forces backward. The sudden spin still pressed my skin back from my face.

"Careful," M-Bot said. "I'd rather not get blown up today. I'm just starting to believe I'm alive. It would be unfortunate to suddenly become un-alive."

"Trying," I said, grinning through gritted teeth as I launched out of the spin and reoriented myself, with the drones scrambling to follow.

"Do you think maybe I can learn to lie?" M-Bot said. "Really lie? And if I can, do you think that might prove I'm sapient?"

"M-Bot, this is *really* not the right time for an existential crisis. Please focus."

"Don't worry. I'm capable of doing both at once because of my multitasking routines."

I cut around another asteroid, then another, pushing myself—and even M-Bot's advanced GravCaps—to their limit. I was rewarded as one of the ships tailing me collided with an asteroid.

"You know, you humans are lucky the Superiority bans advanced AIs," M-Bot said. "Machine reaction times are vastly faster than your fleshy ones; your inferior biological brain would never be able to stay ahead of them." He hesitated. "Not that humans are completely inferior to a robot. Um, you do have better taste than I do in . . . um . . . glasses."

“You don’t wear glasses,” I said. “Wait, *I* don’t wear glasses.”

“I’m trying to figure out how to lie, all right? It’s not as easy as you all pretend it is.”

I turned and popped up into a large clearing among the asteroids, an open spot where collisions weren’t as threatening. Here, many of the more stubborn would-be pilots still scrambled about in a chaotic mess, destructor fire lighting up the placid asteroids.

“One plus one,” M-Bot said, “is two.”

I could imagine the panic of those pilots. I had felt it during some of my first battles. Barely trained, confused by the mess of destruction around me. My instincts fighting my training.

“One plus one,” M-Bot said, “is . . . errrr . . . two.”

As promised, the drones ignored anyone who started flashing their emergency lights. But I could imagine the heartbreak of being forced to do so. You lived your whole life in this suffocating society, with no way to have a good fight. Then you were given a single beautiful chance at expression—only to lose it.

“One plus one,” M-Bot said, “is . . . thr . . . no, two. I can’t say it. Maybe I can rewrite myself to—”

“No!” I said.

*Click*, he replied. *Clickclickclickclick*.

*Great*. I still had one tail, didn’t I? I scanned the proximity monitor, wondering if I’d managed to lose them in the fighting. Indeed, as I entered the denser part of the asteroid field, no ships followed me.

I’d lost my tail. I wasn’t used to that. Krell would try to isolate single fighters, particularly if they proved to be very skilled. It was part of their instructions to find and destroy enemy cytonics.

Today though, it seemed like they had other orders: seek the easiest prey. As I skimmed through the upper portion of the asteroid field, no other drones came after me. In fact, I noted several turning pointedly away from me. And . . . well, that was probably a good strategy. There was no reason to waste resources further testing a pilot with obvious skill.

My heart wrenched as I saw a shuttlecraft explode after having its shield brought down. It was given a chance to surrender, but in a panic, its pilot lost control and collided with an asteroid. Poor soul.

I scanned the battlefield, then fixated on another ship that had been split off from the main body. This larger fighter had a long front fuselage that looked almost like the barrel of a gun. The craft was slow for a fighter, but was also armed with many destructors. An obvious warship.

Perhaps because of its slowness, it had attracted a large number of Krell. The drones spun around it, firing, wearing down its shield. It was basically done for, but refused to give up. I'd been there. Refusing to admit I was beaten, because being beaten ended the dream . . .

"I'm back!" M-Bot said. "What did I miss?"

"We're going in again," I said, swerving toward the unfortunate fighter. "Hang on."

"I don't have any hands," he said. "Why are we going in? It appears that most enemy ships are ignoring us."

"I know," I said.

"This is a timed survival," M-Bot said. "If we want the best chances at success, we should hang back and not draw attention. So why not do that?"

"Because sometimes, one plus one equals three," I said, then dove into the fray toward the struggling fighter.

The fighter's shield went down right as I arrived. The alien fighter *should* have powered down immediately, but they kept on flying, trying to dodge behind a larger asteroid. Their weapons—a full *six* destructor turrets—fired at the Krell.

It was strange to see that many turrets on a fighter, but who knew how alien tactics worked? Perhaps they had rudimentary targeting AIs to fire weapons while the living pilot focused only on flying. Rodge had drawn up some whimsical designs along those lines, and the DDF had found them promising.

In any case, the ship was in trouble, so I did what I did best. I drew attention.

I ripped right through the center of the Krell ships and hit my IMP, blasting away both my shield and theirs. A desperate, dangerous move—but the only way to put them on the defensive and level the odds.

I spun my ship on its axis, then shot a spray of destructor fire—more a wild attempt to scatter pursuers than to really hit anything. I had to quickly spin around, because flying backward was a great way to get yourself exploded.

I picked up some tails—but not as many as I'd hoped—and led these around in another sweep, dodging fire while shooting my own destructors. I hit one of the drones, which fortunately sent the others into defensive postures.

“Oh!” M-Bot said. “We’re being *heroes*.”

“Sometimes I really doubt how fast you claim to be able to think,” I said to him.

“It’s only when you do something that doesn’t make sense,” he said. “I should have expected this. But . . . aren’t all of these aliens technically part of the Superiority—the people who are trying to destroy us?”

“Depends on the context,” I said. “Right now, those other pilots are on our side: the side of people trying not to die.”

I swerved back in, and fortunately the beleaguered ship took the opportunity I’d offered. Its turrets locked onto the unshielded Krell and blew two of them out of the sky.

*Nice shooting, whoever you are,* I thought. Hopefully they would see what I was doing as I drove a few more ships off their back. My job wasn’t to rack up kills, but to keep the enemy on the defensive.

A Krell ship exploded just to my right. My strategy would be effective only as long as the Krell didn’t realize they should ignore me and bring down the larger fighter while it was vulnerable. Fortunately, as a third drone exploded, the others buzzed away. This battle really was different from the ones I’d engaged in over Detritus—these drones weren’t at all interested in destroying the skillful ships.

I fell in beside my new friend, and relaxed a little as a fresh shield ignited around them. I did likewise, bringing my defenses back up.

“We have a call from an unfamiliar channel,” M-Bot said. “I assume it’s the ship we saved. Shall I patch it through?”

“Yes indeed.”

The channel opened to . . . cheering? Dozens of voices celebrating. But I’d only saved one ship, presumably with a single pilot.

“Brave warriors,” said a deep masculine voice, “we are in your debt. This day, you have saved the kitsen flagship from annihilation.”

“Flagship?” I asked. Then understanding hit me. *That ship isn’t much larger than M-Bot, but if the pilots are very small . . .*

“It’s you!” I said. “The king of the fox-gerbils!”

“I do not know what a fox-gerbil is,” the voice said. “But . . . you must mistake me, of course. I am Hesho—and I am no king, since our planet has an equitable representative government. However, as the humble poet and captain of the starship *Gauvalako-An*, I thank you from the deepest well of my heart.”

I hit the mute button. “M-Bot, I think these must be the samurai fox-gerbils I saw earlier.”

“You mean the kitsen?” he said. “They’re a Superiority race with secondary citizenship. Oh! You’ll find this amusing. I just translated the

name of their ship. In their language, it roughly means, ‘Big Enough to Kill You.’ ”

“A ship the size of a fighter must be like a destroyer to them,” I said. “We didn’t just rescue a single pilot; we rescued an entire crew.” I flipped off the mute button. “Captain Hesho, my name is Alanik—and I’m glad to meet you. How would you feel about working together? There’s too much chaos going on in this battle. We need to form an organized resistance.”

“An excellent idea,” Hesho said. “Like a steady rain that becomes a storm, the *Big Enough* is at your disposal.”

“Great. Keep your guns trained to fire on any drones that draw close. If we get into trouble, I’ll try to distract them from you so you can play target practice.”

“If I might make a suggestion,” Hesho replied. “We should rescue another faster ship, like yours, as it would help balance out our fledgling team.”

“Sounds great,” I said, scanning the battlefield, looking for faster ships we could try to recruit. One immediately jumped out at me—the black ship that held Brade, the human. It swerved through the melee, expertly pivoting around an asteroid. She was good. Very good.

“You see that black ship at my mark 238.25?” I said to Hesho. “I’ll go try to help them out and see if they will join us. You hold steady and call me if any drones target you.”

“Excellent,” Hesho said.

I boosted after the black ship, darting through the chaotic fracas of light and explosions. The ship had two Krell tailing it. I radioed Brade, and the comm light lit up, indicating she was listening.

“I’ll get those tails,” I said. “Just give me—”

The black ship suddenly launched a light-lance into a passing *friendly* ship. I was shocked, both to see a light-lance being used from a Krell ship, and to see how it used the momentum of pivoting around a friendly ship. The callous move sent the poor unsuspecting ship spinning to the side—where it bounced against an asteroid. The move let Brade perform an expert turn, however, and she dove back through the center of the drones, blasting them both into space dust. She then buzzed past my ship, missing me by centimeters.

I cursed, spinning on my axis, then boosting to try going after her. That had been an incredible move. She had serious flying experience.

“Hey!” I called. “We’re forming up a flight. We could use your . . .”

The black ship tore away to the right, vanishing farther into the battle, ignoring me completely. I sighed.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said, “I think maybe she doesn’t want to join our team.”

“What made you think that?”

“I’m very observant,” M-Bot said. “However, I believe someone else could use your help. I’m reading distress calls on a general outgoing line. Here, I’m highlighting the source on your proximity monitor and patching it through.”

At once a panicked voice piped through my radio, and my pin translated for me. “My boosters aren’t responding! Help!”

“Send Hesho those coordinates,” I said to M-Bot, spinning on my axis and boosting the other way to slow down. Then I darted toward the distress call—which turned out to be the shuttle that Brade had used as a counterweight.

After colliding with the asteroid, the shuttle had bounced free and now tumbled through space with one of its boosters flashing on and off randomly. It would spurt in one direction, and then the booster would cut out. It would try to turn, but the booster would cut back on erratically, sending the ship tumbling in a different direction.

Three Krell, eager to prey on the weak, were coming in from different directions. “Hang on,” I told the pilot as Hesho’s ship—thankfully—arrived and began gunning at the various nearby Krell.

“Calculating . . . ,” M-Bot said, highlighting a section of my canopy. “Here is a projected flight path of the damaged ship.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I thought that booster was blasting it around randomly.”

“Few things are truly random,” M-Bot said.

I used the projection to intercept the malfunctioning ship and spear it with my light-lance. I boosted to the left, narrowly towing it out of the path of Krell destructor fire. Unfortunately, the ship’s broken booster immediately ignited, yanking me back to the right.



“I’m sorry!” the pilot’s voice said. I saw a glimpse of them through the front of their ship—it was the single dione in the fight, the one with a two-tone face.

“Maybe you should just power down,” I said with a grunt, trying to regain control. “Turn on your emergency lights and drop out of the fight.”

“I can’t,” the voice said.

“There’s no shame in it,” I said. “You’re not a coward.”

“No,” the voice said. “I mean . . . the collision seems to have crushed my emergency lights.”

Scud. Maybe the pilots of the remote drones would see that this pilot was obviously in trouble, and leave them alone? No . . . if anything, there were more drones approaching than I would have expected. Almost as if they wanted to punish this dione who had been so brash as to participate in an activity that should have been reserved for inferiors.

I pulled the shuttle out of the way of another destructor barrage, then grunted as its booster ignited again, towing me back. I tried to compensate by using M-Bot’s projections on my canopy, but my efforts weren’t terribly effective.

“Please,” the pilot said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten you into this. Leave me to my fate. It is what I deserve.”

“Like hell,” I said, grunting again and trying to steer as the malfunctioning booster cut out. While it was down, I towed the craft toward Hesho’s flagship—which was firing with increased desperation at the nearby drones.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “That last turn you made let my cameras get a glimpse at the ship’s boosters. There’s a chunk of stone lodged in the left one’s expression valve. Getting that free might fix the problem, as the booster is locked into a loop, trying to fire up—then finding the obstruction and triggering an emergency power-down.”

“All right,” I said. “Let me just crawl out and fix it then.”

“Ha ha. You’d die!”

I grinned, getting ready for the booster to ignite again.

“That . . . *was* sarcasm, right?” M-Bot said. “Just checking. Because I don’t think you actually want to leave your ship. Explosive decompression would—”

“It was a joke,” I said, then cursed as the booster on the broken ship ignited again. Unfortunately, I couldn’t count on Hesho for help. The larger, slower fighter had its hands full holding off four drones.

“Open a general line,” I said to M-Bot. “I think I’m going to need another ship to pull this off.” A light on my comm blinked on. “This is a general distress call,” I said. “I need a ship with a light-lance to help me at . . . coordinates 150.+60.554 from reference beacon 34.”

I was met by silence. The battlefield had emptied a little, as many of the prospective pilots had given up. The ones remaining were those skilled enough to survive—though many flew unarmed personal crafts, and focused only on dodging and staying ahead of the drones.

In that, it seemed the test had been effective. It had quickly identified those who could fly under pressure. The debris of destroyed ships indicated, however, that the cost had been brutal.

“Leave me,” the dione pilot said again. “I’m sorry. My trouble is not your trouble.”

I eyed the Krell drones that were lurking nearby. “Hold on a sec,” I said, then disengaged my light-lance. Suddenly free and unencumbered, I swooped around and started firing on the drones. I scored a couple of hits, but their shields were still up—so all I did was send them into basic defensive maneuvers.

“I could *really* use some help,” I said over the general line. “Please. Anyone.”

“Well . . . ,” a breezy, feminine voice said. “Do you promise not to shoot me?”

“Yes, of course!” I said. “Why would I shoot you?”

“Um . . .” A ship hovered out from behind a nearby asteroid.

A Krell drone! I put my finger on the trigger, turning my ship toward it and aiming quickly.

“You said you wouldn’t shoot me!” the voice said.

Wait. The *drone* was talking to me?

“Oh!” M-Bot said. “Ask her if she’s an AI!”

“Are you an AI?” I asked over the line.

“No, of course not!” the voice said. “But I’m willing to help. What do you need?”

“Go chase those drones away from that disabled shuttle,” I said. “Give me a little breathing room to try some precise flying.”

“Very well,” the voice said.

The little drone boosted out from her hiding place and moved in. My dione friend in the shuttle let out a fatalistic “So it ends” as the talking drone got close—but the drone did as I’d asked, instead chasing away the enemy ships.

“All right,” I said. “M-Bot, highlight on my canopy that rock jammed into the shuttle’s booster. Then narrow my light-lance’s beam to the tightest possible setting.”

“Oooooohhhh,” he said. “Done.”

I used the break in fighting to get in just behind the shuttle, positioning myself carefully and waiting for the right moment. I wasn’t nearly as good a shot as Kimmalyn or Arturo—my specialties were flying fast and pulling stunts. Fortunately, M-Bot highlighted my target, and I had enough breathing room to sit and fine-tune my aim.

*There.* I picked out the rock as a brightly glowing speck of light rammed into the metal casing of the shuttle’s left booster. It was maybe the size of a person’s head.

I speared the stone with my light-lance, then I spun on my axis and boosted the other direction. The stone popped out with a jolt.

“I have control back!” the dione pilot said. “Booster is online again!”

“Great,” I said. “Follow me.”

The shuttle fell in behind me, flying in a blessedly straight line as we approached Hesho’s ship. The Krell there scattered as soon as we three formed up together; as I’d hoped, they weren’t interested in fighting organized flights of enemies. I lost track of the talking drone. I thought maybe she had gone back to hiding beside an asteroid.

“Captain Hesho,” I said, making a private comm line for the three of us, “I found us another ship.”

“Excellent, Captain Alanik,” Hesho said. “Newcomer, what are your armaments and specialties?”

“I . . . don’t have either,” the dione in the shuttle said. “My name is Morriumur.”

“A dione?” Hesho said, with obvious surprise in his voice. His ship turned, and likely he got a view of Morriumur sitting at the controls of their

ship, behind the glass front. “Not just a dione, an unborn one at that. Curious.”

The three of us settled into a slow patrol, searching for any other ships we could help and invite into our flight. Morriumur wasn’t a terrible pilot—but they obviously didn’t have much combat experience, as they panicked every time they picked up a tail.

Still, they tried hard and managed to stick with me as I led a few Krell back toward the *Big Enough*, which shot them down with precision. The battle had started to spread out, individual ships seeking cover farther within the asteroid field. Krell roved in packs, but bursts of fire were growing more rare.

I invited a few more ships to join us, but they seemed too busy—consumed by their own flying—to stop. I spotted the black ship as it zipped past at one point, well outpacing the two drones trying to chase it down. Again, Brade ignored my offers.

“How much longer is this going to go on?” I demanded. “Don’t they have enough evidence yet?”

“Seven minutes remaining,” M-Bot said.

As we passed another patch of debris from a destroyed ship, I found my anger building. Yes, they’d warned that our training might be dangerous. But using *live fire* on civilian-class ships? I’d already had a simmering hatred for the Superiority, but this stoked it hotter. How could they have such callous disregard for life—all while feigning to be “civilized” and “intelligent”?

Finally, the end arrived. The drones turned as one and made their way back to the mining platform. Winzik’s voice came on the general line, and his voice sounded smug as he congratulated the survivors on their performance.

Hesho, Morriumur, and I headed back. About fifty other ships, it turned out, had survived the test. M-Bot did a quick count of the ones that had been towed back earlier, dropping out—and by combining those two numbers, then subtracting from the total, got a rough estimate of how many ships had been destroyed.

“Twelve ships destroyed,” he said.

Fewer than I’d expected—in the chaos, it had seemed like far more. Still, that was twelve people dead. Murdered by the Superiority.

*Did you expect anything else?* a part of me asked. *You knew what they were capable of—they've been murdering humans for eighty years.*

We landed our ships, though I did so on edge, half expecting some kind of trap or “surprise” second test. But none came. We settled down onto the platform safely, the artificial gravity locking our ships in place. The envelope of atmosphere provided fresh air as we popped open our cockpits.

Other surviving pilots looked rattled as they gathered back near the stage at the far end of the platform. Usually after a battle, I felt like many of these aliens looked—worn out, drained by the extreme amount of attention and focus that fighting required. Today though, I was *livid* as I climbed out and dropped to the floor of the platform.

What kind of *idiots* set up a test like this? I remembered how shocked I'd been to be sent into combat on my first day in training with the DDF, but even then Ironsides—who had been desperate to save her dying people—had only used us as a feint. Here, the Superiority was powerful, secure, and safe. Yet they threw away the lives of eager and trusting pilots?

I shoved my way through the crowd of aliens, moving toward Winzik and the other test administrators. I opened my mouth to—

“What the *hell* is wrong with you people!” a voice shouted right behind me.

I froze, the wind stolen from my own exclamation. I turned, surprised to see a hulking alien creature that looked vaguely like a gorilla. They held a large battle helmet under their arm, and pushed right past me in the crowd, pointing at Winzik.

“Live fire?” the gorilla alien shouted. “In a *testing exercise*? What you just did is the equivalent of murder. What in the name of the deepest void *were you thinking?*”

I shut my mouth at the exclamation, which seemed as furious—but twice as loud—as my own anger.

“You signed the release,” Winzik finally said, his hand held to his armored breast in a sign of aghast horror at the creature's outburst.

“To the void with a release!” the alien shouted. “If I got a child to sign a release saying I could kick them, I'd still be a monster for doing it! These people didn't know what they were getting themselves into! *You* bear the shame for this.”

Creatures of various shapes and sizes moved away from the gorilla, and the officials on the stage seemed completely flabbergasted. “We . . . we needed to see who would be calm under fire,” Winzik finally explained. “And we gave orders to our drone pilots not to harm those who backed down. My, my! Such aggression.”

“You should have used dummy rounds!” I said, stepping up beside the gorilla alien. “Like any sane military on exercises!”

“How would that have tested them?” Winzik asked me. “They’d have known it wasn’t real. Fighting the delvers is extremely taxing to the psyche, Alanik of the UrDail. This was the only way to judge who would be capable and calm.”

“The only way?” the gorilla demanded. “Let’s try another test then! We can test how well you can take a punch. I’ll start with a hammer to the skull!”

“My, my!” another official said. “A *threat*?”

“Yes,” Winzik said, waving a shooing motion. “Such aggression! Gul’zah of the burl? You are released from duty.”

“Released from . . . ,” Gul’zah sputtered. “You think . . .”

I stepped forward to tell the Superiority officials where they could stuff their tests, but a voice spoke in my ear, interrupting me. “Spensa?” M-Bot said. “Please don’t get us kicked out. Remember our mission!”

I seethed, watching the gorilla alien, who backed away from several armed dione guards. I almost started shouting again, but then someone else moved up beside me. Morriumur, the dione with the two-tone face.

“Alanik?” they said to me, pleading. “Come, Alanik. Let’s go get some food. They will have it for us below. Your species does eat, yes?” They nodded at me encouragingly.

Finally, I let Morriumur lead me away.

Morriumur and I followed a group of excited aliens toward a wide stairwell down into the bowels of the mining station. Just before going down the steps, I spotted a tug vessel towing a black Krell ace fighter toward a nearby hangar. I cursed myself silently. I'd been intending to watch for Brade and see if I could get her to talk to me, but it appeared she'd landed quietly away from the rest of us and already vanished.

I sighed and started down the steps, catching up with Morriumur, who walked alone at the back of the crowd. It was moving slowly down the steps, bottlenecked at the doorway at the bottom.

"Thanks for talking me out of doing something stupid up there," I said to Morriumur as we waited.

"Well thank you, in turn, for saving my life!" Morriumur said. They pressed their lips together firmly, which made them look annoyed—but I was beginning to wonder if maybe I just didn't understand dione expressions, because their next words were friendly. "You are a fantastic pilot, Alanik! Better than any I think I've ever seen."

"Have you seen many?" I asked. "I mean, aren't you . . . really young?"

"Ah, yes!" Morriumur said. "I'm two months old, but I have some of the memories and skills of my parents. One of them, my leftparent, was a commercial pilot during their youth—which is how I inherited the skill."

"Huh," I said, taking a step downward. "The people I talked to were surprised you came here to test. Why would a dione come try out for this? And why wouldn't any other of your kind think of doing it? Unless that's too forward a question."

"No, no," they said. "It's not too forward a question at all. Peace forbid! We *encourage* lesser species to learn of our ways, as we hope it will usher them toward prime intelligence. The answer to your question is simple. There were no other diones in the test because my kind have carefully

cultivated souls, ones purged completely of aggression or violence. To come and then train for killing, why, it would be unthinkable!”

“But aren’t some of the drone pilots diones?” I asked.

“Some have been, but never for long. The drone pilots are almost always *tenasi*,” Morriumur explained, using the name of one of the leader races of the Superiority that I hadn’t met. “They have a special ability to fight but not become emotional as they do so. The rest of us are very peaceful.”

“And yet,” I said, “your dione leaders have no problem sending drones to murder a group of unprepared pilots?”

“This . . .” Morriumur looked down at their feet as they descended another step. “This was unexpected. I’m certain the officials know what they’re doing. And they’re right—it wouldn’t do to send people into battle who will simply flee. So some kind of extreme test was required, right?”

“Seems to me they’re a bunch of hypocr—” I started.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said in my ear. “I am not the best at anticipating proper social reactions for organics, but could you maybe *not* insult the first dione friend you’ve made? We might need to learn something from them.”

I bit off my words with difficulty. M-Bot was probably right. “Why did *you* come to this test, then?” I asked Morriumur instead. “Your soul isn’t . . . what did you say? Purged of aggression?”

“I am . . . a special case,” they replied. “I was born with an aggressive personality, and so must prove myself. I came here in an attempt to do that.”

We eventually reached the bottom of the steps and entered a large room with a low ceiling. Bright white lights illuminated cafeteria-style counters and tables; it reminded me of the mess hall back at Alta Base, though the scents . . . well, they were unusual. I caught some familiar ones—fried food, baking bread, something that was like cinnamon. But those scents mixed with a whole host of strange ones. Muddy water. Burning hair. Engine grease? It made for an overpowering, confusing wall of sensation that stopped me as soon as I passed through the doorway.

“What do you eat?” Morriumur asked, pointing at some signs hanging over various serving stations. “Carbon-based vegetation, I assume? There are mineral cocktails, though I doubt you can metabolize that. And over on the far side, there’s a line for lab-grown meat.” That seemed to bother them, judging by the way they drew their lips back into a frowning scowl that showed teeth.



“Uh . . .” I tried to think of how Alanik would respond.

“Your species,” M-Bot said in my ear, “has a diet roughly similar to a human one—though with more nuts and less meat. Also, no milk.”

“Seriously?” I whispered, moving with Morriumur toward the vegetable line. I waved at my chest. “Alanik has breasts. What are they for? Decoration?”

“No milk from *other creatures*, I should say,” M-Bot said. “Your species finds it extremely gross. As do I, by the way. Do you even stop to think how many strange liquids you organics squirt from your orifices?”

“No stranger than the ideas that squirt from your orifice sometimes, M-Bot.”

I followed Morriumur through the line and got a salad of something that seemed similar to algae strips. M-Bot assured me that it fit both my physiology and that of Alanik. As we collected our food, I couldn’t help noticing how much space the other pilots gave us.

When I went to grab some water, I had to crowd between two large gorilla-alien burl who barely gave me a glance, so it wasn’t *me* that everyone was staying away from. It was Morriumur. *Yeah*, I thought, sipping my cup of water and hitting another pocket of open space as I walked back toward them. *They’re scared of Morriumur*. Members of other species kept shooting glances toward them, as if suspicious or worried about the presence of a dione in this space reserved for “lesser” species.

I walked with my tray toward an empty table near the corner of the room. The cinnamon scent was strong here, but as I moved to sit down, Morriumur caught me by the arm.

“Not there!” they hissed. “Are you crazy?”

I frowned, looking at the empty table. It was like all the others. Morriumur steered me to another empty table and settled down.

Scud. I had no idea what I was doing. What was wrong with the first table? I sat down, confused. I needed to steal a hyperdrive soon, because I *was* going to screw up this act sooner or later.

“So, um . . . ,” I said to Morriumur as I dug into my salad. “You said you’ve been alive, um, two months?”

“Yes!” Morriumur said. “I will be born in three months, as a baby, though I will retain these memories as I grow. Or . . . well, I hope to be born in three months. Whether or not I can enter the final stage of the birthing

process will depend on whether or not my family members agree that this personality is a good one to add to their ranks.”

“That’s . . . Huh.” *So strange.*

“Different?” Morriumur offered. “I realize that this is not the way most species do things.”

“I don’t want to be offensive,” I answered carefully, “but yeah, it’s a little odd to me. I mean, how does it work? Do you have two brains right now?”

“Yes, I have two of most internal organs—though the extra arms and legs were absorbed during the cocooning process, and my parents’ brains are linked together for now, acting as one.”

Wow. What a strange conversation.

“If you don’t mind,” they said, “you have the look of a race that uses sexual reproduction, with two different sexes, male and female?” When I nodded, they continued. “That is one of the most popular biological templates in the galaxy, though no one is certain why. Could be parallel evolution. I prefer the theory that you all have some common ancestors who spread through the stars using cytonic hyperjumps long before you even had stone tools!”

I sat up straighter. “Cytonic hyperjumps, you say?” I asked, as innocently as I could.

“Oh, you probably don’t know about those!” Morriumur said. “People used to be able to hyperjump using just their *minds*. It was very dangerous, but I find it an interesting theory as to why some species from different planets look similar. Don’t you agree that would be exciting, if it could ever be proven?”

I nodded. Maybe I could learn something about myself here. “I wonder how they did it? Do you know anything about the process?”

“No,” they said. “Just what’s in the books—and the warning that it’s dangerous. The texts are very careful not to talk about specifics.”

*Drat.* I looked closely at Morriumur, and could tell—now that I thought to check—that the left and right halves of Morriumur’s face had different features. Two people had actually melded together somehow, creating Morriumur—an individual who was larger than most diones I had seen, but only by a few centimeters. The couple must have shed a lot of mass during the . . . the pupation?

I realized I was staring, and looked back down at my salad with a blush. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Morriumur said with a laugh. “I can only guess how odd it must seem—though *I* find it odd that so many species reproduce your way, without ever even *trying out* the personality of the new child. You’re left with random chance! I, instead, can interact with my extended family, and they can decide if this is a version of me they like.”

I found something about that to be distinctly unsettling. “And if they don’t? Like you, I mean.”

Morriumur hesitated, then poked at their own food. “Well, then when I enter the cocoon in three months, my parents will decide that I’m not quite right. They’ll pupate again, and I’ll emerge with another personality. The extended family will try that version out for five months, and we’ll eventually settle on a version of me that everyone likes.”

“That sounds dangerous,” I said. “I mean, no offense, but I don’t think I like the implications. Your family can just keep shaking up your personality until they get something they approve of? I don’t think *anyone* would have approved of me.”

“Non-diones always say things like that,” Morriumur said, sitting up straighter. “But this process has created for us a very peaceful society, of prime intelligence. It . . . does put stress upon me to prove myself, however.” They waved toward the room full of pilots. “That has pushed me to do something extreme. As I told you, this version of my personality is a little . . . aggressive. I thought, what if I show my family that this is a good thing? Maybe it was impulsive of me to join the call for pilots, but with only three months left, this seemed the best way to prove myself.”

“But . . .” I started to object, then trailed off as I noticed that someone new had entered the dining hall. Well, a group of someones—some fifty kitsen, each maybe fifteen centimeters tall. The furry creatures marched up to our table, most wearing little white uniforms of a naval style, their fluffy tails sticking out the back.

I stifled a smile. They seemed to be a powerful spacefaring race that had shown bravery and loyalty in combat. But . . . scud, they were also really cute.

They stopped at the empty chair next to me, and several raised a ladder against it. Others scurried up, then placed another ladder leading to the

table's top. Finally, Hesho—still wearing his formal red silk clothing—climbed up the ladders onto the tabletop. He raised a paw to me, fingers clenched in a fist. Seeing him up close, I could make out the pattern of red on his white fur snout, a color repeated in the fringe of his long, pointed ears.

“Alanik of the UrDail!” he said, his translation collar projecting a bold, deep voice. “Today, we feast to our victory!”

“Captain Hesho of the kitsen!” I said, mimicking his closed-fisted gesture. “Did you only just arrive at lunch?”

“We fetched our own vittles and brought them here,” he said. “We cannot trust a Superiority cafeteria to have proper feasting materials appropriate to our station.”

Another kitsen arrived with an oversized chair, which they placed on the tabletop for Hesho to settle into, his bushy tail sticking out the back. Others brought a small table, which they set in front of him and draped with a tablecloth.

“So,” Hesho said, looking from me to Morriumur. “We are colleagues now, we three? Shall we make a formal pact of mutual aid and support?”

I glanced at Morriumur. “I don’t know that I’d thought about it that much,” I said.

“We will need trustworthy allies if we are to survive future engagements,” Hesho continued. “Though to be honest, I do not know if having a dione in our small fleet will aid our progress or hinder it.”

“Probably hinder,” Morriumur said, looking down at their plate again. “The officials will push me harder than they would a member of a lesser race.”

“Then the kitsen shall welcome this extra difficulty,” Hesho said solemnly. “Perhaps it will prove, finally, that we are worthy to become full citizens of the Superiority.”

“Do we have any idea what happens next?” I asked them. “We passed their test, right?”

“Next we’ll be trained to fight the delvers,” Morriumur said.

“Which means what?” I asked. I still had no idea what I was in for.

“It is hard to say,” Hesho said. “I don’t believe any of us expected the test today to be as brutal as it was.” As he talked, another group of kitsen arrived with steaming plates of food, which they arranged on Hesho’s table.

One, wearing a silken dress, cut his food and began feeding it to him. The others busily set up feasting materials on the tops of several of the chairs at our table.

“The Superiority is odd,” Hesho continued around bites of his tiny steak. “Its officials will work very hard to protect the pristine and peaceful lives of innocents, but once you step outside the bounds of propriety, their retribution can be swift and brutal.”

“The Superiority is wise,” Morriumur said. “It has stood for centuries, providing safety and prosperity for billions of beings.”

“I do not contest those facts,” Hesho said. “And my people are eager to have our citizenship level increased. Still, you cannot dispute that some departments—particularly the Department of Protective Services—can show a disturbing lack of empathy.”

I nodded, and the table fell silent. As we ate, I found my focus drawn to something that I must have been feeling all along. The . . . call of the stars. Starsight’s cytonic-suppression field had quieted it, but out on this station I could hear the song again. I couldn’t distinguish what was being said, but that sound in the back of my mind meant this station was sending out communications.

I set down my fork and closed my eyes, imagining myself flying among the stars, as Gran-Gran had taught me. I felt myself drifting. Maybe . . . maybe I could follow those invisible trails. Did some of them lead to Detritus, and the Superiority forces posted there?

But there was nothing that gave me a clue toward that end. I *did* feel something *else* nearby though. A kind of humming familiarity. What was that?

*Brade*, I realized, recognizing the feeling from earlier. *She’s not in the room, but she’s near.*

I opened my eyes and glanced around. The bustling room was filled with aliens eating and drinking—or in the case of some very strange rocky creatures, pouring liquid on their heads.

The sensation was coming from outside the room. I made an excuse to the others, saying I needed to find a restroom. Morriumur pointed the way, and I ducked out of the dining hall, glancing in the direction Morriumur had indicated. A string of doors ran down the hallway here, each with a sign identifying the kind of disposal unit contained therein.

I glanced in the other direction, where Brade's cytonic sensation seemed to be coming from. There were no guards that I could see, so I slipped away down the hall.

The feeling got stronger as I reached a door off to the side. It was cracked, and I peered in to see that indeed, Brade was there. And she was speaking with a group of dione officials, as well as Winzik.

I crouched beside the door, trying to listen to what Winzik and the other officials were saying inside.

“Hey!” M-Bot said in my ear, nearly making me jump. “Spensa, what are you doing?” I gritted my teeth, concentrating on the sounds from behind the door. “Oh!” M-Bot said after a moment. “Are you hiding? What’s wrong? I was computing our flight back to Starsight. Weren’t you going to go release secretions in the lavatory? Spensa, did you release them in an inappropriate place? Is that why you’re hiding?”

“Shut up,” I whispered as softly as I could. “I’m trying to spy.”

“Oooooohhhh,” M-Bot said.

The others were speaking too quietly for my translator to pick them up. I could hear muffled voices, but couldn’t make anything out.

“Do you maybe want me to enhance your bracelet’s auditory reception capacities, then wire the translations directly into your ear, so your pin won’t give you away?” M-Bot asked. “This will help you spy more efficiently.”

“Yes,” I whispered back.

“Fine. No need to be terse.”

He wirelessly shut off my pin, then began piping the voices from the other room directly into my earpiece. My bracelet’s sound pickup was much more sensitive than the pin’s or my normal hearing, and M-Bot was way better at isolating voices from background chatter.

“—should have seen that this would be such a disaster,” one of the officials was saying. “These drone pilots were trained to fight against the humans at the Detritus preserve! They came out shooting far too aggressively.”

“These casualties *are* unfortunate.” That was Winzik’s voice, which had a calm tone to it. “But you needn’t worry about repercussions. This was an

accident, not an act of aggression.”

“There are a dozen dead!” another official said. These diones sounded far less calm in private than they had outside, when talking to that gorilla burl. “The poor families!”

“Those poor families will be destroyed entirely if we don’t prepare a fighting force to resist the delvers,” Winzik said. “My, my. My department’s suppressors will deal with any outcries of injustice. You have done your duty well.”

“Yes, well . . . ,” another official said. “I guess, as long as you think the test worked . . . But was it necessary for you to bring your human here, Winzik? She makes me uncomfortable.”

“My my, Tizmar,” Winzik said. “You worry far too much. And about the wrong things! Consider instead the Department of Species Integration and their insistence on entering several very aggressive species into our contest. Cuna is up to something here. That newcomer, Alanik, uses human combat strategies. Her people are dangerous from their long association with the scourge, and should remain isolated.”

I frowned as I leaned against the wall—then felt something. A mind pressing against my own.

“What?” said an official inside. “What is wrong? Why is your human standing up, so alert like that? She’s properly trained, isn’t she?”

*Idiot.* If I could “hear” Brade with my senses, then of course she’d “hear” me back. I spun and scrambled back down the hallway. Sweating, I slowed down to walk back into the dining room. I tried to be nonchalant as I sat down at our table.

A moment later, Winzik appeared in the doorway, looking around the room. As I slipped back into conversation with Hesho and Morriumur, from the corner of my eye I could see that the Krell’s faceplate pointed in our direction, lingering on us. Then he retreated.

A short time later, a group of dione officials entered the room bearing tablets. They moved through the tables, talking to the pilots, giving instructions.

“And here we have Alanik,” said a dione official with crimson skin as they arrived at our table. “The noncitizen! You performed quite well in the test. Excellent flying, and rescuing others in need? Delightful. We have



organized you in a flight with the *Big Enough* and its crew. I assume you'll find this acceptable?"

I glanced at Hesho, who stood up and clapped once. It . . . seemed like a sign of assent?

"I'd like that," I said. "Thank you."

"Now," the official said, scrolling their tablet screen and reading. "There is a matter of some . . . sensitivity I would discuss with you two. We have added another member to your flight. A skilled and capable pilot. *Very* skilled."

"Then we shall welcome them!" Hesho said. "Who is this person?"

"It's a human," the official said.

Morriumur gasped softly, putting their hands to their face. Hesho immediately sat back down in his seat, and a kitsen appeared with a fan and began fanning him rapidly. I tried my best to look surprised and horrified.

"Now, you needn't be worried!" the official continued, speaking quickly. "This human is fully licensed. I will provide you with documentation."

"Why," Hesho said, "would we be training to fight one evil by using another?"

"Yes," I said. "Those things enslaved my people for decades! I wouldn't think you'd set them loose on the galaxy."

"This human is *very* well trained," the official said. "We need to test whether she can fight delvers."

"What if this human *is* perfect at fighting them?" Hesho asked. "Will you create flights and fleets only of humans? This is hiring the wolf to guard your sheep. In the end, you will still lose your sheep."

I found that metaphor curious. Had he actually used the words *wolf* and *sheep*? Or had he spoken alien words that got translated into something similar in English?

Either way, I wasn't sure what I thought of Brade joining our flight. She was a cytonic. Would she be able to, with time, tell that I was secretly human? I had the suspicion that she was being assigned to my flight specifically to keep an eye on me.

At the same time, she probably understood much more about being cytonic. She might know the secret to making my powers work properly. She might . . . be able to explain to me what I was. What *we* were.

"I'm sure," I said slowly, "that the Superiority knows what it's doing."

“My people have a long history with the humans,” Hesho said, settling back beneath the fanning of his servant. “Back in the days when we still had shadow-walkers, our people walked between our world and Earth, the human homeworld. This is a bonfire awaiting a spark.”

“If this is not an acceptable situation, Your Majesty,” the dione said, “we can remove you from the flight rolls.”

“I would, of course, have to ask my people,” Hesho said. “As I am *not* their king, but simply one equal among many in a perfectly legal democracy.”

The other kitsen around him nodded vigorously in agreement, even while one fanned him and another served his food.

“So this means we passed the test for sure,” I said, diverting the topic. “We’re going to be trained to fight the delvers?”

“Yes,” the official said. “We’ll send a shuttle to pick you up tomorrow at 1000, Starsight time. It will deliver you to our training grounds. I’m afraid you’ll need to leave your own starships behind and train on our equipment, though we’ll have an appropriate vessel prepared for the kitsen, Captain Hesho.”

Superiority ships. Exactly what I was hoping for. I still didn’t know how I was going to find a chance to steal a hyperdrive from my new ship, let alone get it to M-Bot and jump us back to Detritus, but at least I’d taken one major step toward accomplishing that goal. Though I’d want to triple-check to make certain my hologram disguise would stay in place if I strayed too far from M-Bot.

“To be extra careful regarding the human,” the official said, “we’ve placed a figment in your flight. You might have noticed that one was attending this test. This individual prefers to be addressed as a female, and has asked that you call her simply Vapor.”

Hesho sat up at this. “A figment, you say?” he said, tapping his furry chin with a single clawed finger. “This is some comfort, at least.”

Huh? What was this? A “figment”? I looked around, trying to see if I could pick out what they were referencing. However, before I could ask, the official continued speaking.

“Excellent,” the official said, then pointed absently at Morriumur. “Now, you. Please follow me, and I’ll tell you about your placement.”

“What?” I said, suddenly alert. “Morriumur isn’t with us?”

“They shall be placed in their own solo flight,” the official said. “As is appropriate.”

Morriumur stood up slowly, looking sad. “I enjoyed speaking with you, Alanik.”

“No,” I said, feeling my face flush with outrage as I stood up. “We’re a flight. Morriumur stays with us.”

Both Morriumur and the official looked at me with shocked expressions. Well, let them be shocked. I folded my arms. “What good is a flight of one? Leave Morriumur with us.”

“You already have four in your team,” the official said. “This is the number we decided as a flight size.”

“Surely there isn’t an exact multiple of four in this room,” I said, gesturing to the pilots filling the tables around us. “Besides, we’re already a strange flight with a *human* in it. So we could use the extra pilot with us, in case the vicious creature turns against us.”

“Well,” the official said, rattled as they typed on their tablet, “well, I guess we can rearrange.” They glanced up at me warily, then went back to typing. “Just be ready for the shuttle pickup tomorrow. A Superiority flight suit will be issued to you and will arrive in the morning. You’ll be delivered back to Starsight each evening, so will not need to pack changes of clothing, but if you require sustenance at midday, be prepared with your own food supply. Be on time in the morning.”

At that, the dione turned and hurried away.

“You didn’t need to do that,” Morriumur said to me. “I came into this knowing that I’d be isolated.”

“Yeah, well, I rarely let go of someone once I have my teeth in them,” I said. “It’s the warrior’s way.”

“What a . . . profoundly disturbing metaphor,” Morriumur said, settling back down. “Thank you, in any case. I should like to not be on my own.”

“Wait,” I said, looking around our table. “They said four people were in our team. Who is this Vapor they mentioned?”

“It’s me,” a quiet whisper of a voice said. I jumped, and turned to look, but no one was there. I was hit with the striking scent of cinnamon. Burned cinnamon, actually.

“Welcome, unseen one,” Hesho said, standing, then bowing low. The others of his crew did likewise.

“You’re . . . invisible?” I asked, surprised.

“I am a figment,” said the soft feminine voice, and I realized I knew that voice. I’d heard it before.

“The drone ship that helped me save Morriumur!” I said. “You were on that ship.”

“Figments,” Hesho said, “are known to be able to infiltrate ships and take control of them.”

“So, are all the drones piloted by . . . by people like you?” I asked.

“No,” the disembodied voice said. “There aren’t many of us. I simply took control of one of the ships for this test, against the will of its remote pilot.”

Incredible. But what was she? A smell? Was I talking to a *smell*?

The distinct scent trailed away, but I didn’t know if that meant Vapor was leaving, or . . . something else? I found the idea of a creature that I couldn’t see to be distinctly disturbing. Who knew when she would be watching us?

The lunch was breaking up, creatures from other tables filing out to return to their ships. Hesho bade us farewell with gusto, then climbed down the ladders set up by his crew. Together, the group of over fifty diminutive foxes gathered their things and trotted out the doors.

Morriumur and I followed, eventually emerging out into the open air at the top of the station. Black sky overhead, speckled with stars. Ships were launching a few at a time for the flight back to Starsight.

I bade farewell to Morriumur, then walked over to M-Bot and hauled myself up onto his wing so I could get into the cockpit.

“Some engineers came to try to inspect me while you were below,” M-Bot said, “but I scared them away by making it seem like they’d accidentally tripped an alarm system.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

“It was kind of like a lie,” he said. “I *can* do it, as you said. Under the right circumstances.”

As we prepared to take off, I felt something against my mind again. I glanced to where the sensation seemed to be coming from, and noticed a set of partially opened hangar doors. I could see a shadow standing inside. Brade—watching my ship.

“I don’t like the idea of you going off on your own tomorrow,” M-Bot said. “Flying another ship.”

“Jealous?”

“Maybe! It would be cool if I could feel that. But more, I think it’s dangerous. We’ll need to double-check your bracelet’s holographic projector. Its CPU should be able to manage your hologram without my aid, but we’ll want to observe it first. It would be better if I could go with you.”

“I don’t really see that we have a choice,” I said as I lifted us up and away from the platform. “We need to get our hands on a Superiority ship.”

“It’s possible they won’t give you one that can hyperjump,” M-Bot said. “At least not at first.”

“I considered that,” I said. “But if I can gain their trust, there’s a good chance they’ll relax their security around me. I might not be given a starfighter that can hyperjump, but I’ll likely be near one. If I can’t steal a hyperdrive, perhaps I can at least get some photos of one.”

“Photos won’t get us home.”

“I know. I’m still working on that.”

As we flew toward Starsight and I thought it through, I realized that I’d inadvertently been given a backup plan. Winzik and the others had just assigned me to the same flight as their pet human. Did Brade know there was an entire planet full of humans like her, only free? Might she be willing to escape there, if I gave her the right opportunity?

If I couldn’t steal a hyperdrive from the Superiority, maybe I could instead steal away one of their cytonics.

I settled M-Bot into place on the top of our embassy on Starsight, then sat back in my seat, suddenly exhausted.

Being Alanik was taxing. I was accustomed to just going with my gut and doing what seemed natural for me. It had gotten me through life well so far. I'd admittedly earned the occasional bump or scrape, but I'd never had to worry about pretending to be someone other than myself.

I sighed, finally hitting the canopy release and standing up to stretch. The embassy didn't have a ground crew to pull over steps for me, so I climbed out onto the wing, then hopped down.

"Overall," M-Bot said to me, "I think that went well. We're not dead, and you actually managed to get into their military."

"By the skin of my teeth," I said, grimacing as I remembered the burl gorilla alien who had thrown the tantrum and been kicked out. That *would* have been me if I'd gotten to Winzik a tad earlier.

"Do your teeth have skin?" M-Bot asked.

"I don't think so," I said, walking over and hooking up M-Bot's charging cords and network link. "Not sure where the saying comes from, actually."

"Hmmm. Oh! Well, it's from an English version of the Bible. That's a really antiquated version of the Book of Saints, from Old Earth."

I got the last cord hooked up, then traipsed down the steps. Doomslug trilled at me excitedly from the bedroom when I checked on her. I'd set up a litter box for her and some chopped mushrooms, which, judging by the crumbs left, she'd found acceptable as a meal. I gave her a scratch, then noted a little light on the wall. It was blinking, indicating that I had a delivery, so I tromped down to the bottom floor and checked the delivery box. Before flying out this morning, I'd made a few orders to test my requisition abilities.

Inside the box, I found a bundle of new clothing in my size, along with some toiletries. I grabbed everything and headed up to the kitchen, where I fried a small algae patty and ate it in a bun. Then I walked back to my bathroom. It was still a little strange that I had one all to myself. Scud, I had this entire *building* all to myself—well, myself and my pet slug, who insisted I give her another head scratch as I passed her in the hall.

In the bathroom's mirror, I looked at myself. Or, the illusion of Alanik that I wore. *Doomslug doesn't notice I'm not wearing my real face*, I thought. She obviously worked by scent and sound, as she didn't have eyes. It hit me that my disguise was even more tenuous than I'd thought. What about that creature Vapor, who *was* a scent? Did I have to worry she'd know I was human?

I groaned softly, feeling weighed down. I flipped off the lights, then—with a sigh of relief—took off my hologram bracelet. Though M-Bot had scanned the place for spy devices, I wanted to be extra careful, so I kept the bracelet on at all times.

For now, I wanted to be myself. Even in the dark. Even alone. Even for just a little while.

I cleansed, and it felt luxurious to not be pressed for time. Back on Detritus, it seemed I had always been running to some training exercise or another. Here though . . . I could simply rest and let the pod's cleansing agents wash me.

I finally pulled myself out, then sighed and put the bracelet back on. I turned on the light and pulled a set of loose, generic clothing from my bundle. They looked kind of like the scrubs that medical personnel wore. I figured these would make good all-purpose work or sleeping clothing.

I sorted through the toiletries. Hopefully the people watching my requisition orders wouldn't wonder why I'd forgotten my toothpaste. Though I'd checked with M-Bot before ordering everything, I still had an amusing time looking over the warning label on the back of the tube. My pin translated the words, and it listed which species in the galaxy would find the toothpaste toxic. Running a galactic empire seemed to carry a lot of strange problems I'd never considered.

Brushing my teeth in front of the mirror, I found the toothpaste actually had a nice minty taste to it, way better than the bitter stuff we used back home. Such were apparently the benefits of having an actual economy and

infrastructure, instead of being forced to repurpose ancient biorefineries to manufacture toothpaste.

My hair was longer than I used to keep it, and was fortunately about the length of Alanik's, inching past my shoulders. I'd kept it short when I'd been young, partially because I'd hated the color. Heroes from Gran-Gran's stories had all had raven-black hair or golden-flax hair—maybe the occasional fire-scarlet color thrown in for variety. Nobody in those tales had dirty-brown hair.

It was white now though, with the hologram on. I ran my fingers through it, and the illusion really was perfect, with each individual strand recolored. My expressions also mapped quite well to Alanik's face, and I couldn't feel anything different when I poked my skin, though I knew that my features and hers weren't the same.

The only things that were off were the bone ridges Alanik had under her eyes and along the sides of her face. Those were pure illusion, and if I stuck my finger into them, the hologram distorted. Still, the bracelet was good enough to make my hair seem to brush against the ridges—instead of clipping through the center of them—when the two touched.

I stared at myself in the mirror, smiling, frowning, trying to find some error in the way it all looked, but it was an excellent illusion. I could almost believe I was wearing makeup.

It was no surprise when I found myself thinking about Alanik. Had she worried about how to fit her hair into her helmet? What would she think of me imitating her?

*Don't trust their peace . . . their lies . . .*

I brushed my hair, then trailed out into the hall and down the stairs to my bedroom.

"Ah," M-Bot said to me. "You'll be interested to read this. We've just received a communication back from Alanik's people, sent—supposedly—via secure but unmonitored Superiority channels."

"I don't doubt for a moment that they read it anyway," I said, settling down at the bedroom's desk. "Let's see what it says."

M-Bot displayed the message at the desk's workstation, translated to English. It gave a bland response to our bland rundown of events. Which was promising—it didn't seem they'd immediately contacted the



Superiority. “And is there an encrypted, hidden message? Like the one we sent?”

“Yes,” M-Bot said. “It’s a very interesting cypher, based on the number of letters in each word mapped to a one-time pad message with the key in your pin. Completely unbreakable without the pin. I guess that’s more than what you want to know. Anyway, the encrypted message simply says: ‘We want to speak to Alanik.’ ”

“Send back a report on today’s test, and encode, ‘She will contact you when she is well. For now, I am embedded among the Superiority, imitating her. Please do not give me away.’ ”

“Sounds like a reasonable response,” M-Bot said. “I will construct that message.”

I nodded, walking to the bed. I really needed some sleep, and yet when I thought about lying down, I realized that I wasn’t tired. So I settled into a chair beside the window instead and looked down the skyscraper-lined street of Starsight. I watched all those people out there move, flow. A million different goals. A million different jobs. A million creatures who saw me as one of the most dangerous things in the galaxy.

“M-Bot?” I asked. “Can you hear those people down below, on the street?”

“Not sure,” he said. “Um, that was a lie. I can totally hear them. How was my lie though?”

“Try not to tell people that you’re lying *immediately* after you do it. It ruins the effect.”

“Right. Okay. Then . . . Um, not sure.” He started humming.

“Could you maybe *not* practice your lying right now? It’s getting a little annoying.”

“Spensa,” he said. “You’re not supposed to *like* it when I lie. Right? How do you know when to do it and when not to?”

I sighed.

“All right, fine,” he said. “I have advanced surveillance equipment. From this height, I might be able to isolate audio from people on the street, though it’s no guarantee and will depend on interference. Why?”

“I just want to know what they talk about,” I said. “There aren’t any Krell raids for them to anticipate. Do they talk about manufactory jobs? About the humans? Maybe the delvers?”

“I’m scanning for a sampling,” M-Bot said. “It seems, for now, they talk about normal things. Picking their kids up from care centers. Ordering ingredients for dinner. The health and training of their pets.”

“Normal things,” I repeated. “Is all of that . . . normal?”

“That seems like it would depend on a large number of variables.”

I stared down, watching everyone move. The people walking past displayed that same lack of urgency I’d noticed when I’d first flown in. This place was busy, but only because there were so many pieces moving at once. Individually, it was peaceful. Normal?

No. I *couldn’t* believe it. This was the Superiority, the empire that had practically destroyed humankind. They were the ones who funded Winzik and his Krell domination of my people. These were the monsters I’d spent my life training to fight, the faceless creatures who had lurked in the sky, bombing our civilization centers and bringing us nearly to extinction.

Starsight was one of their primary trade and political hubs. This place had to be a front intended to make it *seem* like life in their empire was peaceful. How many of those people passing on the street were in the Superiority’s employ, directed to *act* innocent? It seemed so obvious, now that I thought about it. This was an act, a way to give outsiders a false impression of how great the empire was.

Well, I wouldn’t believe their lies of peace and prosperity. I’d seen how they treated the pilots at the test today. All those people on the street, they were culpable for what had been done to my father and my friends.

These weren’t just simple people, going about their simple lives. They were my enemies. We were at war.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “Not to be a nag, but it has currently been fifteen hours since you have slept and—as you’re adjusting to this station’s sleep cycle—I recorded only four hours of actually restful sleep for you last night.”

“Yeah, so?” I snapped.

“You get cranky if you don’t sleep.”

“No I don’t.”

“Do you mind if I record your tone for later, to use as evidence against you in a future disagreement?”

Scud. Arguing with a machine was an unreal level of frustrating. He was probably right, but I also knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I tried. For

reasons that he, no matter how smart, would never be able to understand.

Instead, I changed into the generic work jumpsuit that had arrived in that bundle of clothes I'd ordered, and went back up to the rooftop. The jumpsuit felt like a flight suit—thick, canvaslike material with a fit that was snug, but not too tight. Comfortable, utilitarian clothing. The best kind.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said as I walked over to the ship. “You’re not going to get yourself into trouble somehow, are you? We aren’t flying off to—”

“Relax,” I said. “We can’t let their ground crews get too close to you, which means I’m going to have to keep you maintained.”

“Now?” M-Bot said.

“I want you in tip-top shape in case we need to make an escape.” I checked the little maintenance locker on the rooftop and found some basic supplies, including a grease gun filled with vacuum-rated lubricant. I grabbed that and walked back to him. “M-Bot?” I asked. “How did you learn about that phrase I used? About the teeth? Did you have it in your databases?”

“No,” he said. “I got it from the Starsight information archive. There’s a great deal in here about Old Earth, from before it vanished—more than the fragmented databases your people have.”

“Can you tell me about it?” I asked, using the gun to begin greasing the joints of his wing flaps. “Some of the things we don’t cover in school, you know?”

“There’s a lot of information here,” he said. “Shall I just start in alphabetical order? A. A. Attanasio was a science fiction writer who sounds interesting.”

“Tell me the story of Pine Leaf,” I said. “And how she fought four Crow warriors at once.”

“Fallen Leaf,” M-Bot said, “is often associated with the historical figure known as Pine Leaf, or Woman Chief. She was a Native American woman of Gros Ventre birth, though many pseudo-historical accounts of bravery are associated with her life.”

He said it so dryly, in such a monotone.

“And the story of how she fought four men at once?” I asked. “Touching them each with her rod in turn, taking them captive due to the shame of letting a woman outfence them?”

“She is reported to have counted coup four times in one battle,” M-Bot said. “Though, it is uncertain if this legend is true. Historically, she was instrumental in turning back a Blackfoot raid, where she first gained renown among other Crow. And . . . Why are you sighing? Did I do something wrong?”

“I just miss Gran-Gran,” I said softly. She made the stories of Old Earth come alive, simply in the way she told them. There was always a *passion* in her voice that M-Bot, however well intentioned, couldn’t impart.

“I’m sorry,” M-Bot said softly. “This is more proof that I’m not really alive, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “I’m not a very good storyteller either. That doesn’t mean *I’m* not alive.”

“The dione philosopher and scientist Zentu claimed that there are three important hallmarks that indicate true life. Growth is the first. The being must change over time. I’ve changed, haven’t I? I can learn, I can grow.”

“Definitely,” I said. “The mere fact that you made me your pilot proves that.”

“Basic self-determinism is the second,” M-Bot said. “A living thing has to be able to respond to stimuli to better its situation. I can’t fly myself. If I could fly, do you think it would make me alive? Do you think that’s why whoever created me forbade me from being able to move on my own?”

“You can use your smaller thrusters to adjust your position,” I said. “So you can kind of do that one already. If a plant is alive because it can respond to sunlight, then you’re alive.”

“I don’t want to be as alive as a plant,” M-Bot said. “I want to be *really* alive.”

I grunted, applying quick squirts of lubricant to the hinges of his wing flaps. The mere scent of it made me feel better. That room down below, it was too clean. Even my quarters back at DDF headquarters had smelled faintly of grease and exhaust fumes.

“What’s the third indication of life?” I asked. “At least according to this philosopher.”

“Reproduction,” M-Bot said. “A living thing is capable of making more versions of itself, or at least its species is capable of this at some point in its life cycle. I’ve been wondering . . . You’re going to have to fly a new ship tomorrow. Maybe we can find a way to upload a copy of my program to

that fighter's data banks. Then you could have my help, but still be able to fly one of their ships."

"You could do that?" I asked, looking up from the wing.

"In theory," M-Bot said. "I'm just a program—granted, one that relies on trans-cytonic speeds for processing. But at my core, the thing you call M-Bot is nothing more than a group of coded bits."

"You're way more," I said. "You're a person."

"A person is nothing more than an organic collection of coded information." He hesitated. "Anyway, my programming forbids me from making copies of my main processing code. There's a fail-safe to prevent me from duplicating myself. I might be able to change it if . . ." *Click. Clickclickclickclick.*

I kept working, falling silent as his program rebooted. *Whoever made him didn't want to risk the enemy getting a copy of him, I thought. Or . . . they didn't want to risk their AIs copying themselves without supervision.*

"I'm back," M-Bot finally said. "Sorry."

"It's fine," I said.

"Maybe we can find a way around . . . what I said earlier."

"I don't know if I like that, honestly," I said. "Making another of you feels wrong. Weird."

"No more weird than identical twin human beings," he said. "To be perfectly frank, I don't know how my programming would respond to being confined in an ordinary computer system—one that doesn't have trans-cytonic processing."

"You say those words like I should know what they mean."

"To create computers that can think as quickly as my mind, you need processors that can communicate faster than normal electric signals facilitate. My design achieves this by using tiny cytonic communicators, which pass signals at FTL speeds through my processing units."

"And the station's shield doesn't stop that?"

"My own shielding appears to be enough to block their shielding. Or, well, that's a simplified and maybe contradictory way of putting it. In any case, I can still process at my required speeds."

"Huh," I said. "Cytonic processors. So that's why I can feel you thinking."

"What do you mean?"

“Sometimes, when I’m deep inside . . . whatever it is I do . . . I can *feel* you. Your mind, your processors. Like I can feel Brade sometimes. But anyway, talk of copying you is moot, right? We can’t transfer you to a new ship, because that ship wouldn’t be able to think fast enough.”

“I should be able to survive in one,” M-Bot said. “I’d simply think slower—I’d be dumb. Not as dumb as a human though, and you all seem to get along just fine.” He paused. “Um, no offense.”

“I’m sure you find our stupidity endearing.”

“Nope! Anyway, I’d like to at least try to find a way to replicate myself. If just to prove that . . . that I’m actually alive.”

I walked around him toward his other wing, smiling. After I’d joined the DDF officially—and M-Bot had come out into the open—the ground crews had taken over maintaining him. Before that though, it had just been me and Rodge. Rodge had done most of the difficult work, but a lot of the simple jobs—greasing, peeling paint, checking wires—he’d given over to me.

There was something satisfying about maintaining my own ship. Something relaxing. Calming.

Then I looked into the polished surface of his hull, and saw infinity staring back at me. A deep void in place of my reflection. One pierced by a handful of *burning* white lights, like terrible suns. Watching me.

The eyes. A delver, or more than one, was here. *Right here.*

I stumbled back, dropping the grease gun with a clatter. The reflection vanished, and I swear there was *nothing* reflected for a short time. Then, like a screen turning on, Alanik’s figure reappeared—the holographic image I was wearing.

“Spensa?” M-Bot asked. “What’s wrong?”

I slumped down to the rooftop. Overhead, ships coursed along invisible highways. The city squirmed and moved, a sickening *buzz* of annoying insects all around, suffocating me.

“Spensa?” M-Bot repeated.

“I’m all right,” I whispered. “I’m just . . . just worried about tomorrow. About having to fly without you.”

I felt alone. M-Bot was great, but he didn’t understand me like Kimmalyne or FM did. Or Jorgen. Scud, I missed him. I missed being able to complain to him, and listen to his overly rational—yet somehow calming—arguments back.

“Don’t worry, Spensa!” M-Bot said. “You can do this! You’re really good at flying. Better than anyone else! You’re practically inhuman in your skill.”

I felt a chill at that. *Practically inhuman*. Feeling sick, I leaned forward, wrapping my arms around my legs.

“What did I say?” M-Bot asked, his voice growing smaller. “Spensa? What’s wrong? What’s *really* wrong?”

“There’s a story Gran-Gran would tell,” I whispered. “An odd one that never quite fit with the others. Not a story about queens, knights, or samurai. A story about a man . . . who lost his shadow.”

“How do you lose your shadow?” M-Bot asked.

“It was a fanciful story,” I said, remembering the first time Gran-Gran had told it to me. Sitting on top of our cubelike apartment back in the caverns, the deep, hungry light of the forges painting everything red. “One strange evening, while on a journey, a writer woke up to find that his shadow had vanished. There was nothing he could do, and no doctor could help him. Eventually he moved on with his life.

“Except one day, the shadow came back. It knocked on the door, and greeted its former master with joy. It had traveled the world, and had come to understand men. Better, in fact, than the writer himself did. The shadow had seen the evil in the hearts of the men of the land, while the writer had sat beside his hearth, entertaining only kindhearted fancies.”

“That’s strange,” M-Bot said. “Didn’t your grandmother usually tell you stories about slaying monsters?”

“Sometimes,” I whispered, “the monsters slew the men. In this story, the shadow took the man’s place. It persuaded the writer that it could show him the world, but only if the man agreed to become the shadow for a short time. And of course when the man did so, the shadow refused to let him go free. The shadow took his place, married a princess, and became wealthy. While the real man, being a shadow, wasted away and became thin and dark, barely alive . . .”

I looked back at M-Bot. “I always wondered why she told me that story. She said it was a story her mother had told her, during the days when they’d traveled the stars.”

“So, you’re worried about what?” M-Bot said. “That your shadow might take your place?”

“No,” I whispered. “I worry that I’m already the shadow.”

I closed my eyes, thinking of where the delvers lived. The place between moments, that cold nowhere. Gran-Gran said that in the old days, people had feared and distrusted the engine crew. They’d distrusted cytonics.

Ever since I’d begun seeing the eyes, I’d never quite felt the same. Now that I’d traveled to the nowhere, I couldn’t help wondering if what had come back wasn’t completely *me* anymore. Or if maybe the *me* I’d known had always been something else. Something not quite human.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “You said you weren’t a good storyteller. That was a lie. I’m impressed at how you do it so easily.”

I looked at the fallen grease gun, which had squirted a little glob of clear lubricant onto the rooftop. Scud. I was getting emotional—M-Bot really *was* right. I got strange when I didn’t have enough sleep.

That was it, obviously. Sleep deprivation was making me hallucinate, and it was why I was rambling. I stood up—pointedly did *not* look at my reflection—and put away the grease gun. I then stopped at the stairwell down into the embassy.

The thought of sleeping in that sterile, empty room . . . with the eyes watching me . . .

“Hey,” I said to M-Bot instead. “Pop your cockpit. I’m going to sleep up here tonight.”

“You have an entire building with four bedrooms,” M-Bot said. “And you’re going back to sleeping in my cockpit, like you did when you were forbidden DDF quarters?”

“Yup,” I said, yawning as I climbed in and pulled the canopy closed. “Could you dim the canopy for me?”

“I suspect a bed might be more comfortable,” M-Bot said.

“Probably would be.” I leaned the seat back and dug out my blanket. Then I settled in, listening to the noise of traffic outside. A strange, somehow accusatory sound.

Even as I began to drift off, I was left with a sense of isolation. Surrounded by noise, but alone. I was in a place with a thousand species, but I felt more lonely than I ever had exploring the caverns at home.



# PART THREE

## INTERLUDE

Jorgen Weight stepped into the infirmary, flight helmet under his arm. Perhaps he should have stowed the helmet, but there was no rule requiring it—and he felt good carrying it. Made him feel ready to fly at a moment's notice. Gave him the illusion that he was in control.

The creature lying in the infirmary bed proved that wasn't the case. They'd hooked the alien woman to all kinds of tubes and monitors, with a mask over her face to control her breathing, but what drew Jorgen's attention immediately were the straps binding her arms to the table. The DDF brass wanted to be extra careful, even though Spensa had seemed to think the alien wasn't a danger.

The fallen pilot's alien physiology left the DDF medics scratching their heads. The best they'd been able to do was patch her up and hope she eventually woke. Over the last two days, Jorgen had checked on her at least six times. He knew it was unlikely she'd wake up while he was there, but he still wanted the chance to be the first to speak to her. The first one to make the demand.

*Can you find Spensa?*

He felt a growing sense of worry each day Spensa was away without communication. Had he done the right thing, encouraging her to leave like that? Had he stranded her alone, without backup, to be captured and tortured?

He'd broken DDF chain-of-command protocol in telling her to go. Now, if she was captured because of it . . . Well, Jorgen could think of nothing worse than disobeying, then realizing he'd been wrong to do so. So he came here, hoping. This alien was a cytonic; she'd be able to find Spensa and help her, right?

But first, the alien had to awaken. A doctor with a clipboard stepped up to Jorgen, dutifully showing him the report on the alien's vitals. Jorgen

couldn't read most of the chart, but people tended to be deferent to pilots. Even the highest government officials would often step aside for a man or woman bearing an active-duty pilot's pin.

Jorgen didn't care for the attention, yet he bore it because of the tradition. His people existed, lived, because the machine of war worked—and if he had to be one of its most prominent gears, he would bear that position with solemnity.

“Any update?” he asked the doctor. “Tell me what's not on the chart. Has she stirred? Does she speak in her sleep?”

The doctor shook her head. “Nothing. Her heartbeat is irregular, and we don't know if that's normal for her species. She breathes our air just fine, but her oxygen levels are low. Again, we can't tell if that is normal or not.”

The same as before—and it could be weeks before she awakened, if she ever did. Engineering was analyzing her ship, but so far they hadn't been able to break the encryption on her data banks.

The scientists could analyze that all they wanted. The secrets Jorgen wanted were inside this creature's brain. He felt an . . . electricity when he drew near her. A quiet shock that ran through him, like the sensation of being splashed with cold water. He could feel it now, standing over her, listening to the steady hiss of the respirator.

He'd felt that same sensation before, when he'd first met Spensa. He'd thought it was attraction, and surely he felt that. For all she frustrated him, he was attracted like a moth to a flame. There was something else though. Something this alien had too. Something he knew was hidden deep within his family line.

He turned to the doctor. “Please make a note to send me word if anything about her situation changes.”

“I've already done so,” the doctor replied.

“By the code at the bottom of the chart, you've updated her status priority, requiring me to renew my request. Department procedures 1173-b.”

“Oh,” she said, looking over the chart again. “All right.”

Jorgen nodded to her, then left the infirmary, returning to the corridor of Platform Prime. He was on his way to his ship's berth to take the ground crew shift report when the klaxons went crazy. He froze, reading the pattern of buzzing alarms that rang through the sterile metal corridor.

*Incoming fire*, he thought. *Not good.*

Jorgen fought against the tide of scrambling pilots and crew members running for their ships, and headed straight for the command room. Incoming *fire*, not incoming *ships*. The fighters weren't being scrambled. This was something bigger. Something worse.

His stomach churned as he reached the command room, where the guards let him enter. Inside, the alarm sounds were muted. By now, the DDF had moved much of their command staff up from Alta Base to Platform Prime. Admiral Cobb wanted to separate the military installation from the civilian population, to divide potential Krell targets.

They were still setting everything up though, which made this room a mess of wires and temporary monitors. Jorgen didn't bother the command staff, who had gathered around a large monitor at the far side of the room. Though he was of a rank to join in operations here, he didn't want to be a distraction. Instead he made his way down the line of workstations to that of Ensign Nydora, a young woman in the Radio Corps whom he knew from their time in school together.

"What's happening?" he asked, leaning down beside her.

She responded by pointing to her monitor, which—by the designation at the bottom—was displaying a feed from one of their scout ships out beyond the shells. The feed showed two enormous Krell battleships moving toward the planet.

"They're settling into positions," Nydora whispered, "where they can shoot through an upcoming gap in the defensive platforms and hit Alta Base on the surface."

"Can we fire back?" Jorgen asked.

Nydora shook her head. "We don't have control of the long-range guns on the outer platforms yet—and even if we did, those battleships are far enough away that they'd be able to move before our shots arrived. The planet, though, can't move."

Jorgen's stomach twisted upon itself. From orbit, the enemy could bombard the surface of Detritus with a devastating rain of fire and death. With sustained shelling, and with the planet's own gravity working in the Krell's favor, those battleships would be able to obliterate even the deepest caverns.

"What are our chances?" Jorgen asked.

“Depends on how far engineering got . . .”

Jorgen felt helpless as he watched the two battleships glide into position, then open gunports.

“No response to our requests to speak to them,” someone down the row said. “Doesn’t seem like they’re going to give us a warning shot first.”

That had always been the Krell’s way. No warning. No quarter. No demands for surrender. The DDF knew—from the information Spensa had stolen—that much of what the Krell had done so far had been intended only to suppress the humans. Six months ago, however, the enemy had moved to attempting full-on extermination.

“Why now, though?” Jorgen asked.

“They had to wait for an alignment of the platforms,” Nydora said. “This is their first clear shot at Alta in weeks. That’s why they’re moving now.”

Indeed, Jorgen watched the screen as the inscrutable motion of the many platforms that made up Detritus’s shells lined them up, providing an opening. The battleships immediately started firing hefty kinetic shots, projectiles that were the size of fighters. Jorgen sent a silent prayer to the stars and the spirits of his ancestors who sailed them. For all his skill and training in a cockpit, he couldn’t fight a battleship.

The fate of humankind rested in the hands of the Saints and the DDF engineers.

The room grew so silent, Jorgen could hear his own heartbeat. Nobody breathed as the rain of projectiles dove toward the planet. Then something changed—one of the platforms at the side of the opening started moving, its ancient mechanisms lighting up. Data started streaming across Nydora’s secondary monitor—reports from engineering and DDF scout ships.

The planet Detritus was no easy target. Nydora’s main screen highlighted the platform in motion, a flat sheet of metal. It seemed to move slowly, but so did the bombs. Jorgen was watching from such a distance that his brain had trouble comprehending the scale of the encounter—that section of metal was a hundred kilometers across.

As the bombs approached, sections of the platform opened up and launched a series of bright energy blasts into space. The blasts crashed into the projectiles fired by the battleships, meeting force with energy, blowing them away and negating their momentum. A shield sprang up around the

platform, intercepting the debris, slowing it and preventing it from raining down upon the surface.

Everyone in the room let out a collective sigh of relief. Nydora even whooped. The battleships slowly withdrew, indicating—although they’d fired on Alta itself, and obviously wouldn’t have minded destroying it—that this had been a test of the planetary defenses.

Jorgen patted Nydora on the back, then stepped to the side of the room, breathing in and out to calm his nerves. *Finally some good news.* One of the vice admirals called in over the main comm line to congratulate the engineers on their work.

Oddly though, Admiral Cobb himself remained in place at his monitor, limply holding an empty coffee cup and staring at the screen, even after all the others had gone to make announcements or offer congratulations.

Jorgen stepped closer. “Sir?” he asked. “You don’t look pleased. The engineers got the defenses up in time.”

“That wasn’t one of the platforms our engineers worked on,” Cobb said softly. “That was Detritus’s old defensive programming. We got lucky that a working platform was nearby, and was still capable of deploying anti-bombardment countermeasures.”

“Oh,” Jorgen said. A little of his relief melted away. “But . . . we’re still safe, sir.”

“Note the power readings at the bottom of the screen, Captain,” Cobb said. “The amount of energy that disruption drained is incredible. These old platforms barely have any juice in them. Even if we get others functioning, it will take months or years to fabricate new solar collectors.

“And even if we get that going, and the countermeasures continue to work . . . well, if the Krell start a sustained bombardment, they’ll cut through these platforms eventually. Our defenses aren’t meant to protect us from a long-term attack. They’re a last-ditch fail-safe meant to stall invaders so that friendly battleships can get to the system and fight them off. Only we don’t *have* friendly battleships.”

Jorgen gazed back across the room of people celebrating. They looked commanding in their stiffly pressed and spotless DDF uniforms. That was just a front. Compared to the enemy’s resources, the DDF wasn’t an opposing military—it was a group of ragged refugees with barely a gun between them.

“We stay trapped on this planet,” Cobb said, “and we die. It’s that simple. We’re an egg with an extra-hard shell, yes, but we’re done as soon as the enemy realize that they can’t crack us with a spoon and decide to get a sledgehammer instead. Unfortunately, our only chance of escape vanished without a trace. That girl . . .”

“I stand by my decision, sir,” Jorgen said. “Spensa will come through for us. We just need to give her time.”

“Still wish you’d called me,” Cobb said. There hadn’t been any repercussions for what Jorgen had done. He could argue that, under code 17-b, he’d been capable of making the call he’d made, but the truth was that he hadn’t even been the senior officer on that mission. Colonel Ng from the ground forces had been leading the security team. Jorgen should have talked to him, or called Cobb.

It was possible that, in sending Spensa away, Jorgen had doomed them all. *We stay trapped on this planet, and we die. It’s that simple . . .*

Jorgen took a deep breath. “Sir. I might need to disobey another rule.”

“I don’t know half of them anyway, Captain. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, sir. I mean . . . a family rule. Something we’re not supposed to speak about.”

Cobb eyed him.

“You know,” Jorgen said, “about how my family fought to keep the defect from being talked about? Kept it from being known to the general public? The one that Spensa’s father had, the . . . the . . .”

“Cytonics?” Cobb asked.

“There’s a reason, sir,” Jorgen said.

“I know. Some of your ancestors had it. Wasn’t confined just to the engine crews. You saying you’ve been hearing things, son? Seeing things?”

Jorgen pressed his lips closed tight and nodded. “White lights, sir. In the corners of my vision. Like . . . Like eyes.”

There. He’d said it. Why was he sweating so much? Speaking the words hadn’t been *that* hard, had it?

“Well, that’s something at least,” Cobb said, and held his cup to the side. An aide helpfully grabbed it and ran to get him a refill. “Come with me. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“From the fleet Psychological Corps?” Jorgen asked.

“No. She’s an old woman with an excellent taste in pies.”

I bolted awake to M-Bot panicking.

“Spensa!” he cried. “Spensa!”

My heart suddenly pounding, I scrambled to get into position in the cockpit. I grabbed the control sphere, blinking bleary eyes, my thumb on the trigger.

“What!” I said. “Who do I shoot?”

“Someone is in the embassy,” M-Bot said. “I set up proximity alerts. They’re sneaking up on where they *think* you’re sleeping.”

Scud. Assassins? Sweating, my mind still cloudy from sleep, I powered up my ship and paused. Then . . . what? Fly away? To where? I was completely in the clutches of the Superiority—if they wanted me dead, they wouldn’t resort to assassins, would they?

I needed to know more. Determined, I fumbled in the cockpit’s small weapons locker and got out my handheld destructor pistol. So far as I’d been able to tell, personal weapons were forbidden on Starsight—but I also appeared to have some diplomatic exemptions, so I wasn’t certain where I stood.

I made sure my hologram was still active, then quietly cracked the canopy and slipped out, keeping a low profile in case of snipers. I dashed to the steps down into the embassy. Here, I crept down toward the top floor.

“There are two of them,” M-Bot said softly through my earpiece. “One has reached the kitchen on the top floor. The other is on the bottom floor near the door, perhaps guarding the exit.”

Right. I’d never been in any actual ground conflicts, and my training was minimal. However, as I left the stairwell and stepped onto the top floor, I felt the same calm, cold determination that I experienced before a starfighter battle. I could face an assassin, so long as I had a gun in my



hand. This was a problem I could shoot. I much preferred it to the nebulous worries I'd fallen asleep to last night.

"The enemy is positioned approximately two meters inside the door," M-Bot whispered to me. "Near the counter. Their back is to the door right now. I think they might be surprised you weren't in the bedroom."

I nodded, then leaped into the room, leveling my destructor. A brown-carapaced Krell turned around at the motion, dropping something to the ground that shattered. A plate?

"Ahh!" the Krell said, the voice being interpreted by my translator as female. "Don't kill me!"

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Cleaning your dishes!" the Krell woman said. She waved her armored limbs in a sort of anxious way. "We were sent to do your housecleaning!"

Housecleaning? I frowned, my gun still leveled. But the Krell woman wore a belt full of cleaning tools on the outside of her sandstone carapace, and through the helmet faceplate I could see the panicked motions from the shrimpy crab creature. She didn't have any weapons I could see.

A sound suddenly came from down below, on the first floor. A . . . vacuum cleaner?

"Hmm," M-Bot said. "Perhaps we misjudged this situation."

"Such aggression!" the Krell cleaner said. "I was not warned of this!"

"Who sent you?" I demanded, stepping forward.

She cringed back. "We are employed by the Department of Species Integration!"

Cuna. I narrowed my eyes, but put away my gun. "Sorry about the mistake," I said, then left her and went to check on the other one—a second Krell, who was humming as they vacuumed the ground floor.

As I watched them, the chimes at the door rang. I frowned again, then checked the door. A package had been set by it—presumably my new flight suit.

Cuna herself stood outside. Tall, blue-skinned, shrouded in an enveloping set of dark blue robes.

I opened the door.

Cuna gave me one of their creepy smiles, showing too many teeth. "Ah, Emissary Alanik! May I enter?"

"Did you send your lackeys to sneak up on me?" I said.

Cuna stopped short. “Lackeys? I’m not familiar with the translation of that word. Minions? I sent Mrs. Chamwit to be your housekeeper, and she brought an assistant. I realized that you didn’t bring your own staff, and might need some lent to you.”

*Spies. I knew it. I found and turned off their surveillance devices, so they sent their agents to the building to watch me.* Had I left anything sitting out that would give me away?

“I hope you find them helpful,” Cuna said, checking their communication tablet. “Hm. I’m a little behind. You’re scheduled for pickup in roughly thirty-five minutes. We wouldn’t want you to be late on your first day as a pilot.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked, suspicious. *And what game are you playing?*

“Only to see that you have an excellent opinion of the Superiority to take back to your people,” Cuna said. “May I enter?”

I stepped back, reluctantly giving them space to enter. They peeked in at the vacuuming Krell, then strolled to a different meeting room, which was empty. I followed, hovering in the doorway as Cuna sat down.

“I’m very pleased with your efforts, Alanik,” Cuna said. “And I apologize for the . . . harrowing experience yesterday. I wasn’t aware that Winzik and his kind would use such a dramatic method of selecting their pilots. The Department of Protective Services can be reckless.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the one who needs your apology—and the ones who *do* deserve it are all dead at the moment.”

“Indeed,” Cuna said. “What do you know of the human wars, Alanik of UrDail?”

“I know the humans lost,” I said carefully. “After dominating my planet and forcing us to fight at their side.”

“A political way of saying it,” Cuna replied. “Your people will fit in with the Superiority far better than some assume. I, however, am known on occasion to defy social customs. Perhaps that is due to my preference for interacting with, and learning the habits of, species that have not yet joined the Superiority.”

Cuna seemed so tall and aloof. Their voice grew soft, even contemplative, as they continued, turning their head slightly to gaze out the front window. “I’d guess you’ve never seen the aftermath of a delver attack,

and for that I envy you. They can wipe out all life on a planet just by passing by it—or rather, *through* it. They don't entirely exist in our reality. They sweep past, and leave only silence."

What did this have to do with the conversation? We'd been talking about the humans, right?

"That's terrible," I said. "But . . . you told me before that the delvers left our galaxy centuries ago. So how has anyone seen firsthand what they can do to a planet?"

Cuna tapped their fingers together. And I realized the answer had stared me in the eyes not a few days before. Standing on the space station outside Detritus, watching that ancient video. I *had* seen what delvers could do.

"The humans summoned a delver, didn't they?" I asked. "That's why you're all so frightened of the delvers, and why you hate humans so much. It wasn't just the wars. The humans tried to *weaponize* the delvers."

"Yes. We nearly lost those wars anyway. But during the second one, the humans developed hidden bases on obscure planets around small or dying stars. There, they began a terrible program. If they'd been successful, then the Superiority would have not just been destroyed, it would have *vanished*."

I felt a still coldness deep inside me. *The delver has turned back on us . . .* Words spoken by the man I'd seen on that video—said right before everyone on the planet Detritus had been consumed. I'd *watched* those long-dead humans try this. That was what they'd been doing. They'd *summoned* a delver. Only instead of destroying humankind's enemies, the thing had turned on them.

The horror of it welled up in me again, and I felt sick, leaning against the side of the doorframe.

"We are exceedingly fortunate that their own weapon turned against them," Cuna said. "The delvers cannot be fought or controlled. The humans successfully brought one to our realm, and then it destroyed several of their most important planets and bases. Even after the humans were defeated, this delver was a scourge upon the galaxy for years until it finally left.

"I know your people have a reverence for the humans, Alanik. No, you don't need to object. I can understand, and empathize to an extent. Yet you *must* understand that the task we are about here—learning to fight against delvers—is an *essential* project.

“Winzik and I might not agree on how all this should proceed, but we conceived this project together: a way to develop countermeasures against the delvers. Until we can do this, the Superiority is in grave danger.”

“You . . . think the humans are going to return, don’t you?” I asked, the pieces falling into place. “I’ve read on the local datanet that they’re supposedly all contained in preserves—but some people claim that the humans are close to escaping.”

Cuna finally turned from the window to glance at me, their alien expression unreadable. They made a dismissive gesture, sweeping two fingers to the side in front of them. “Look back through the archives, and you’ll find that the humans are supposedly *always* close to escaping. Indeed, flare-ups in their resistance always seem to coincide—somehow—with times when the Department of Protective Services needs to pass some important funding bill.”

That one hit me like a punch to the stomach. The Department of Protective Services—the Krell . . . they were using Detritus and my people as a way to gain political favor?

“You think they *let* the humans grow more dangerous?” I said. “They maybe relax their guard a little, so that everyone will be properly afraid, and so that the department can prove it’s doing a good job?”

“I would not make such a claim,” Cuna said. “For a claim such as that would require evidence, not mere assumption. Let us simply say I find it curious. And it has been happening for so long, so regularly, that I doubt the humans are any kind of *real* danger to us, no matter what all the experts and commentators think.”

*You’re wrong though, I thought. Winzik made a mistake. He let the DDF get too strong. He let me become a pilot. And now . . . and now we really are close to breaking out. It’s not just a convenient excuse this time. He must be panicking . . .*

So now, he creates this space force. This special team of pilots. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

“The delvers are the real danger,” Cuna said. “Perhaps I am wrong, and perhaps the humans will become a threat again in the future. But even if they do not, someone else will try to use the delvers. Dealing with delvers is foolish, reckless, aggressive behavior—and so some race out there is bound

to try it. The Superiority will not be safe until we can fight the delvers, or at least drive them away.”

“I can see the logic in that,” I said. And I did. My main goal was to steal a hyperdrive . . . but if there was some Superiority weapon against the delvers that I could discover, then I was certain we’d find that handy as well.

But why was Cuna telling me all of this? They rose and stepped closer to me, then glanced at my side—toward the weapon sticking out of my pocket, where I’d hastily stuffed it. I quickly tucked it farther inside.

“You should not carry that about,” Cuna said. “You are under my protection, but even that will extend only so far.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I thought you were . . . Anyway, I might have frightened the housekeeper upstairs.”

“I’ll deal with that,” Cuna said. “I just need you to understand how important your task is. Winzik must be watched. I do not have the power over this training program that I would like. So, I would ask that you remember our deal. I will see that your people’s application to the Superiority is met with approval. In turn, I would ask you to report to me on your training.”

“I’m to be your spy,” I said.

“You are to provide service to the Superiority. I have proper clearance and authorization to know anything you would tell me.”

Great. It was as I feared; I was trapped between the two of them.

“Do not be so concerned,” Cuna said. They gave me another predatory smile. “I asked you to do this in part because I know you will be safe. As a cytonic, you can hyperjump away at a moment’s notice, should you be in danger.”

“Yeah, about that,” I said. How much should I admit? “I won’t have my ship, and I need the technology on it to hyperjump.”

“Ah,” Cuna said. “So you’re not fully trained yet. You still require mechanical aid?”

“Exactly. Do you suppose you could give me some sort of training?”

Cuna shook their head. “Untrained cytonics are far less dangerous than trained ones. It took centuries of training before our own cytonics were powerful enough to draw delvers by accident—and we suspect your people are far from doing so. To train you would only accelerate that danger.”

“Maybe if I had a Superiority ship with a hyperdrive, I could try out using your technology,” I said. “Then I could see how it felt, and learn how to do FTL safely.”

“Oooh . . . ,” M-Bot said in my ear. “Nice!”

“Well, I cannot keep you from experiencing a hyperjump,” Cuna said. “The training facility you’ll visit today will require one. So perhaps you’d best pay attention to the process.”

Awesome. I checked the clock on my bracelet. Scud, it was almost time.

“Don’t let me keep you,” Cuna said with their ever-calm voice. “Go prepare. You have a busy day ahead of you. One I’ll be very interested to hear about.”

Right. Well, I couldn’t exactly kick them out. I dashed to the stairwell, grabbing the package and passing the vacuuming Krell—who jumped back as I entered. I didn’t buy the timid act. They were a spy, obviously. I walked a fine line in this game.

In the bedroom, I quickly checked for anything I’d left that might expose who I really was. Then I changed into the flight suit that had been delivered, grabbed Doomslug from my room, and hurried up to M-Bot. “Watch Doomslug,” I said to him softly, tucking her into his cockpit. “Cuna says I’ll need to hyperjump to go to the training today. Will you be able to contact me?”

“Your bracelet doesn’t have a cytonic transmitter,” M-Bot said. “It’s supposed to, but your people didn’t have the right parts to fabricate one. So unless your new ship has one—and we can figure out how to link up—then no, we won’t be able to talk once you hyperjump away.”

Great. I stored the destructor pistol. “Keep watch for anything odd.”

“And what do I do if I find something odd, Spensa? I can’t escape.”

“I don’t know,” I said, frustrated. I hated being so much in the power of others. “If everything goes wrong, at least try to die heroically, all right?”

“I . . . um . . . I have no response to that. How unusual. But here, I’ve got something for you.”

“What?” I asked.

“I’m uploading a second holographic map to your bracelet. If you use it, the image will make you look like a left dione of inconspicuous features, which I’ve constructed. It might be good to have a backup persona to adopt.”

“I don’t know that I can handle the one I already have,” I said.

“Still, it is wise, just in case. You should get going. I’ll still have contact with you up until you hyperjump, so we aren’t going radio silent quite yet.”

I scrambled back down the steps to grab some breakfast, then pack a lunch, as I’d been instructed. I put this in a backpack I’d ordered, then reached the bottom floor right in time for the chime to go off, informing me that the shuttle had arrived to take me to training.

Cuna stood on the landing near the front door.

“Don’t touch my ship,” I said to them.

“I wouldn’t think of doing so.”

I debated for a moment longer, suffering that untrustworthy smile, then sighed and marched out the door.

The shuttle was a small aircar with an alien driver whose race I didn't recognize, though they looked vaguely fungoid in appearance. M-Bot would have been excited.

I found the seat overly cushy. It was like those in Jorgen's luxury cars. I shook my head, strapping in as the shuttle took off.

Rather than dwelling on the fact that I had to leave M-Bot behind, I watched the city beneath us—a seemingly endless expanse of buildings. “Where are we going?” I asked M-Bot, barely whispering so the shuttle's driver couldn't overhear.

He piped up in my ear. “The orders you received say you'll be transported to the *Weights and Measures*.”

“Is that a ship?” I asked. What an innocent-sounding name.

“Yes. A large trade vessel.”

It was obviously a cover. This *Weights and Measures* would be a military ship, just not one that the Superiority wanted the common people to know about.

“Can we go over the different species I'll be flying with today?” I asked. “I feel like Alanik would know something about them.”

“That's actually a great idea!” M-Bot said. “We wouldn't want you sounding more ignorant than you normally are. Let's see . . . Morriumur is a dione. You've got some experience with them by now. Though Morriumur is what is known as a draft—their term for a person who is not yet born.”

I shivered and turned to look out the window. “What they do feels like eugenics or something,” I whispered. “They shouldn't be able to decide what personalities people are born with.”

“That's a very human-centric way of looking at it,” M-Bot said. “If you're to pull off this mission, you'll need to learn to see things from alien perspectives.”



“I’ll try,” I whispered. “I’m most interested in the race they called figments. What’s the deal with them?”

“They are sapient beings who exist as a localized cloud of particulates in the air. Basically, they’re smells.”

“Talking smells?”

“Talking, thinking, and—from what I’ve read—somewhat dangerous smells,” he answered. “They are not a large population, but are spoken of in hushed tones throughout the Superiority. Sources on the local datanet insist that all remaining figments—many died in the human wars, and they are slow to reproduce—work as secret government operatives.

“Very little is known about them. Apparently, they usually investigate matters that involve internal Superiority politics, particularly the infractions of very high-ranking officials. They can pilot ships by infusing the electronics of the vehicle, and interrupting—or spoofing—the electronic signals from the controls.”

“Vapor did that in the test yesterday,” I said. “She took over one of the drones, and was flying it. So she just kind of . . . flew over to it and seized control?”

“Exactly,” M-Bot said. “Or at least that’s how people on the datanet think it works. There is very little official data about figments, but I can see why one showing up to the piloting test caused such a stir.”

“So she’s a spy too,” I whispered. “An invisible spy.”

“Who can survive in space,” M-Bot said. “So they’re not simply gaseous beings—otherwise the vacuum would rip them apart. It seems they can travel through space with no special equipment, and can move at speed between ships. In the wars, they’d often infiltrate the mechanical portion of an enemy fighter and take control of it with the pilot still on board.”

“Scud,” I whispered. As if I didn’t have enough to worry about. “What about the human?”

“There are very few like her. Most humans must remain in the preserves. If an official wants to remove one, the human must be licensed—basically, someone has to take responsibility for them if they cause harm or damage.”

“And do they?”

“Sometimes,” M-Bot said. “I see more often a pattern of scapegoating and prejudice. Only government officials are supposed to keep humans, and then only for security or research purposes. I think the Superiority uses

them in part because it likes the occasional reminder that they won the war.”

I nodded to myself as we skimmed across the top of the city. I’d need to learn more about this sort of thing if I was going to recruit Brade. I wasn’t certain I would need to do that, but I had to at least try to free her, right?

I sighed and rubbed my forehead, trying to keep all of this straight. So I now separately had plans to steal a hyperdrive, rescue an enslaved human, and maybe find the secret to fighting the delvers. Maybe I should just keep my mind on the main goal.

“Are you all right?” M-Bot asked. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” I whispered. “I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed. At least the kitsen make some kind of sense.”

“That might be because of their history with humankind,” M-Bot said. “Thousands of years ago, they made first contact with humans on Earth—before either society industrialized.”

“How did *that* happen?”

“Cytonic teleportation doesn’t require technology,” M-Bot said. “As Cuna implied, if you can figure out how to use your powers, you’ll be able to teleport yourself alone—and not just your ship. Early cytonics from the kitsen people ended up on Earth, for reasons that now seem lost to time. There was trade and interaction between them and various regions of East Asia on Earth. Several kitsen cultures were directly influenced by Earth ones. The exchange happened until the kitsen cytonics vanished.”

“Vanished?”

“It’s a tragic story,” M-Bot said. “Though it should be noted that the kitsen were only a late steel-age society then, so records might be untrustworthy. Apparently their people did not trust the cytonics, so the cytonics left. Humans were part of this disagreement—a war is implied. The end result stranded the main population of kitsen on their homeworld for centuries until the Superiority made contact.”

“Huh,” I whispered. “Where did the kitsen cytonics go?”

“Nobody knows,” he replied. “All that remains are legends. Perhaps you should ask Hesho which one he believes. I’m more curious as to why the cytonics would leave in the first place. Just because they weren’t trusted? You didn’t trust me when we first met, and I didn’t leave.”

“You can’t leave,” I said.

“I could sulk,” he said. “I have a sulking subroutine.”

“Oh, I know.”

My shuttle flew down low, and we neared some docks that extended away from the city, out into the darkness. Just before we passed out of the air shell, however, I spotted a group of people waving signs. I couldn’t read them—the distance was too great for my pin to translate for me—so I whispered to M-Bot.

“There’s a group of people here waving signs,” I said. “Right next to the docks.” I squinted. “An alien that looks like a gorilla is leading them. I think it’s a burl, the same species as the one who got kicked out of the flight test.”

“Let me check the local news networks,” M-Bot said. “Just a moment.”

We flew past the demonstrators, and the shuttle carried me out of the air shield. I started to lift off my seat, my hair floating in zero G as we left the platform’s gravitational field. We flew along the docks, most of which were filled with large craft of a size that couldn’t land on launchpads.

The stars came awake to me again, like a distant melody. The information that Starsight was sending through the nowhere to other planets. I tried to concentrate on the different sounds, but again there were *far* too many of them. It was like a rushing river in the deep caverns. If I let the music sit in the back of my mind, I heard it as a simple tune, easy to ignore. But if I tried to pick out anything specific, it turned into a clatter.

A part of me was surprised they let themselves use cytonic communication at all. Yes, the Superiority limited how much of it was used—most people had to communicate with other worlds by sending letters that were loaded onto memory chips, then carried on starships and hooked up to local datanets when they finished traveling. However, the important people could use not just radio but cytonic communication through the nowhere. They had let me do it, when sending a message to Alanik’s homeworld.

“Found the reason for those protesters,” M-Bot said. “Apparently, the deaths at the test didn’t go unnoticed. That pilot Gul’zah who was ejected from the tests yesterday is complaining vocally, with some support, about the way the Superiority treats lesser species.”

Huh. That was more defiance than I’d expected.

We approached the last ship on the docks, and its enormous size dwarfed our little shuttle. It was even larger than those battleships that threatened my home, with a multitude of ports along the sides, probably for launching starfighters.

*Those knobs on it are gun emplacements*, I thought, though the guns were retracted for now. Which meant I was right: the *Weights and Measures* was very obviously a military vessel, a carrier ship.

Seeing it made me worried. This ship was built to teleport places and then launch its fleet—which meant I probably wasn’t going to be assigned a starfighter with its own hyperdrive. Still, I kept up hope as my shuttle flew in through a large open bay door that had an invisible shield holding in an atmosphere. Artificial gravity pulled me back into my seat, and we settled down on a launchpad in the wide chamber.

Out the window I spotted the first true military presence I’d seen on Starsight—diones wearing naval uniforms and carrying sidearms were lined up awaiting us.

“You get out here,” the driver announced, popping open the door. “You’re scheduled for pickup again at 9000.”

“All right,” I said, climbing out. The air smelled sterile, a little like ammonia. Other shuttles were landing in the bay around me, letting out a steady stream of pilots. The fifty or so who had passed the test. As I was wondering what to do next, the shuttle next to me opened its doors, releasing a bunch of kitsen. Today, the diminutive animals zoomed out on small platforms like flying plates, big enough to carry about five kitsen each.

Hesho himself hovered over to me, attended only by two kitsen—a driver, and a kitsen with a bright red-and-gold uniform, carrying what appeared to be an old, intricately carved metal shield.

The pilot brought the plate up to eye level with me.

“Good morning, Captain Alanik,” Hesho said from his podium at the center of the platform.

“Captain Hesho,” I said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Unfortunately, no,” he said. “I was required to spend much of the sleep cycle engaged in political discourses, casting my votes in the planetary assembly of my people. Ha ha. Politics is such a pain. Is it not?”

“Um, I guess so? Did the votes at least go your way?”

“No, I lost every one,” Hesho said. “The rest of the assembly voted unanimously against my desires in each matter. What rotten luck! Ah, the indignities you must suffer when your people are a true democracy, and not a shadow dictatorship ruled by an ancestral line of kings. Right?”

The other kitsen flying past raised a cheer for democracy.

Morriumur walked over to join us, looking uncomfortable in their white Superiority flight suit. Nearby, a group of four other pilots were led farther into the *Weights and Measures*.

“Have you seen our other two flight members?” Hesho asked.

“I haven’t smelled Vapor yet,” Morriumur said. “As for the human . . .” They seemed distinctly uncomfortable with the idea.

“I should like to see this one in person,” Hesho said. “The legends speak of humans as giants who live in the mist and who feast upon the bodies of the dead.”

“I’ve seen several,” Morriumur said. “They weren’t any bigger than I am. Most were smaller, actually. But there was something . . . off about them. Something dangerous. I’d recognize the sensation again in an instant.”

A small drone—not unlike one of the kitsen flying platforms—hovered over to us. “Ah,” a voice said from a speaker in it. It sounded like one of the officials we’d met yesterday. “Flight Fifteen. Excellent. No stragglers?”

“We’re missing two members,” I said.

“No,” a voice said from the air next to me. “Just one.”

I jumped. So Vapor *was* here? I hadn’t smelled cinnamon. Just that ammonia scent . . . which faded to cinnamon almost immediately. Scud. How long had she been watching? Had she . . . been in the shuttle with me?

“The human will join you at a later time, Flight Fifteen,” the official instructed us. “You are to report to jump room six. I’ll show you.” The remote-controlled drone buzzed off, so we followed. Before we reached the door from the shuttle drop-off bay to the interior, we were stopped by a pair of guards armed with destructor rifles, who looked through our bags and then waved us onward.

“‘Flight Fifteen’?” I asked the others as we stepped into a hallway. “Not exactly punchy, is it? Can we choose something else?”

“I like it being a number,” Morriumur said. “It’s simple, easy to record, and easy to remember.”

“Nonsense,” Hesho said from his platform to my right. “I agree with Captain Alanik. A number won’t do. I shall call us the Flowers of Night’s Last Kiss.”

“That is exactly what I was talking about,” Morriumur said. “How could we say that mouthful in context, Hesho?”

“Nobody will write poetry about ‘Flight Fifteen,’ ” Hesho said. “You shall see, Captain Morriumur. Bestowing proper names is one of my talents. If destiny had not chosen me for my current service, I surely would have been a poet.”

“A warrior poet?” I said. “Like an Old Earth skald!”

“Precisely!” Hesho said, raising a furry fist to me.

I raised one back, grinning. We joined several other groups of pilots being led down the hallway. Those flights had been sorted by species—many had only one species represented, and a handful had two species mixed. Ours was the only one I saw that had more than two different races represented.

*Hesho’s people have a history with humans, I thought. And so do Alanik’s. Vapor’s people fought in the wars. Maybe we’d been chosen specifically because we might be able to deal with Brade.*

More soldiers stood watch along this hallway, a pair of Krell this time, wearing full armor instead of just the ordinary sandstone carapace. As we passed them, I realized I hadn’t seen any “lesser species” in this carrier, save for us pilots. All the guards and officials we passed were Krell or diones.

It left me wondering . . . why did they need us pilots again? They fought my people on Detritus with remote-controlled drone ships.

*No, I thought. If I can hear the instructions sent to the drones, the delver will be able to as well. They needed a force of pilots trained in the cockpit.* “M-Bot?” I whispered, intending to ask if he’d found out anything about the remote drone programs the Superiority used.

My earpiece returned only static at that. Scud. Had something happened to him? My heart started racing, until I realized I was inside a military ship. They must have communications shielding in place. Either that or I’d simply gotten beyond the bracelet’s communication range already. I was truly on my own.

We were led through some corridors with featureless metallic walls and vivid red carpet down the center. We arrived at an intersection and the drone turned right, toward a corridor lined with rooms.

The rest of my flight turned to follow, but I hesitated at the intersection. Right? Why were we turning right?

I knew, logically, that there was no reason for me to be confused. And yet some piece of me reached out, looking farther down the hallway we'd been traveling. Not right at the intersection but straight ahead. *That* was the way to go. I could feel something up there . . .

"What do you think you're doing?" barked a soldier guarding the intersection.

I froze in place, realizing I'd started to walk down the hallway. I looked up at the writing on the wall, and my translator helpfully piped out the meaning.

RESTRICTED AREA. ENGINEERING AND ENGINES.

I blushed and turned right instead, hurrying to catch up with the others. The guard watched me until the group of us turned into one of the rooms off the corridor. I felt before I arrived that Brade was inside—and indeed, I stepped in to find her sitting alone in the little chamber, which contained a half dozen jumpseats. Brade wore the same sharp white flight suit we all wore, and sat in the back row, buckled in, looking out the window.

"So that's her," Hesho said, hovering near my head. "She doesn't look so dangerous. Still, a blade that has slain a hundred men may not shine like one freshly forged. Danger, sweet like a forbidden perfume. I will know thee."

"That was beautiful, Hesho," I said.

"Thank you," he said.

The other kitsen flew into the room, chattering together. The drone that had been leading us indicated we should strap in and wait for further instructions, then left.

"Strap in?" Hesho asked. "I thought we'd be assigned our starfighters."

"We likely will," Morriumur said, taking a seat. "Once the *Weights and Measures* carries us to the training location—a specialized facility several light-years away."

“I . . . ,” Hesho said. “I assumed we’d have hyperdrive-capable starships. So we could fly there ourselves.”

“I’ll admit,” I said, “I was hoping the same.”

“Oh, they’d never give us individual ships capable of hyperjumps,” Morriumur said. “That kind of technology is dangerous! It’s never trusted to lesser races. Misusing it could draw the attention of the delvers upon us.”

“We’re learning to fight the delvers!” I said.

“It still wouldn’t be wise,” Morriumur said. “FTL jumps are *always* handled by highly trained expert technicians who have prime intelligence. Even special-classification species, like figments, aren’t allowed. Right, Vapor?”

I jumped as she spoke from just behind me. “This is correct.”

Scud. I was *never* going to get used to having an invisible person in our flight. “Some races have cytonics,” I said, sitting down and strapping in. “They don’t need Superiority ships to hyperjump.”

“Letting a cytonic teleport a ship is *incredibly* dangerous,” Morriumur said, making an odd hand gesture—a kind of swiping motion. A dione indication of dismissiveness, maybe? “Going back to cytonics would be like returning to ancient combustion engines instead of using acclivity rings! No, no, in modern society we would *never* use a method so foolhardy. Our FTL jumps are extremely safe, and never draw delver attention.”

Curious, I glanced at Brade, but she didn’t look back at me. M-Bot’s research had reinforced what Cuna had told me: the modern people of the Superiority knew about cytonics, but the bulk of the population believed there were none left among them. It likely wouldn’t be known that Brade was one, let alone that I was one too.

So . . . could it be possible that this phantom “FTL technology” the Superiority had was all just a lie? They claimed to have something safe to use, but what if that was just an excuse to control and suppress knowledge of cytonics?

I closed my eyes, listening to the stars as Gran-Gran had always taught. I felt the *Weights and Measures* finally start moving, unhooking from the dock and accelerating slowly away from Starsight. Those were physical sensations, and seemed distant, disconnected.

The stars . . . the cytonic communications . . . I tried to parse them, understand them. I tried the exercise my grandmother had taught me.



Pretending I was flying. Rising. Soaring through space.

I could . . . hear . . . something. Something close. Louder, more demanding.

*Prepare for hyperjump.*

Orders from the captain of this ship. Passed down to the engine room. I could feel it there. And the hyperdrive . . . There was something *familiar* about it . . .

I heard the captain order the jump. I waited, watching, feeling what was going on. Trying to absorb the process.

My mind *flooded* with information. A location. The place we were going. I knew it intimately. I could—

A voice *screamed* from somewhere nearby. Then the ship suddenly entered the nowhere.

I was there, hanging in the not-place, surrounded by blackness. And the eyes. *They were here.*

Except they weren't looking at me.

I saw them, sensed them, heard them. But their gaze didn't find me. They were focused elsewhere. As if . . . as if looking toward the source of the scream.

Yes, that was it. The piercing, agonized scream lingered in my mind. It distracted the delvers from seeing the *Weights and Measures* as it slipped through the nowhere.

It was over like a snap of the fingers. I lurched back into my seat in the little room, grunting. I felt as if I'd been *thrown* physically, then been caught by the chair. I groaned, sagging forward.

"Captain Alanik?" Hesho asked, hovering nearby. "Are you well?"

I looked around the jump room, which held only the members of my flight. Morriumur didn't seem to have even noticed that moment in the nowhere.

I looked back at Brade. She met my eyes, then narrowed them at me. She knew I was cytonic. Did she . . . did she suspect I was human as well? I had a moment of panic and looked down at my hands, but they were still a light violet shade, indicating that my disguise was functioning.

"Welcome, everyone!" A voice came over the PA system. It was Winzik. "We've arrived at our training facility! This is going to be so exciting, yes indeed! You probably have many questions. A drone will lead you to your flight's dock, and you can get your starfighter assignments."

"We're here?" Hesho asked. "We hyperjumped? Usually they give some kind of warning before it happens!" The door of our jump room opened and he zipped out, the other kitsen tagging along behind on their platforms.

The rest of us, including Brade, gathered outside in the hallway, then followed a drone that had arrived to lead us. Another drone chased after the kitsen, barely keeping up with them.

I looked toward the engine room. *That direction*, I thought. *The scream came from that direction.*

This technology was no sham. Superiority FTL drives *did* let them hide—the delvers *hadn't* seen us. It felt even more vital to me than ever that I find a way to steal a hyperdrive. My people *needed* this technology.

At the same time, I had the striking suspicion that whatever was driving this ship, it wasn't technology in the traditional sense. There was something too familiar about it. Something—

“What did you sense?” a curious voice asked beside me.

I stiffened, smelling cinnamon. I tried, with some effort, to keep myself from squirming at Vapor's presence as I walked after the rest of my team. If I smelled her . . . did that mean I was *breathing* her in?

“To most people, a hyperjump is imperceptible,” Vapor said, speaking with her breezy voice. “Not to you. Curious.”

“Why does the Superiority risk using cytonic communications?” I blurted out. Perhaps the wrong thing to say to change the subject, but it had been on my mind. “Everyone is so scared of delvers, but we blatantly use communication that might draw their attention.”

Vapor's scent changed to one that was slightly minty. Was that intentional on her part? Or was it like how a human changed moods?

“It's been over a hundred years since the last delver attack,” she said. “It's easy to grow lax, in the face of that. Besides, cytonic communication was never actually enough to draw a delver into our realm.”

“But—”

“If a delver has already come to our realm, then they might hear that communication and follow it. They can hear all wireless signals—radio included, though cytonic communication is the most attractive to them. In the past, wise empires learned to hide their communication, but these days it can be employed very cautiously. Assuming no delver is nearby. Assuming nobody has been brash enough to draw them into our realm by cytonic travel or by dangerous use of AI.”

Her scent receded. I followed the drone, not trusting myself to answer. I'd come here with the goal of stealing a hyperdrive, but my task was

suddenly far more daunting. I couldn't just run off with a small starfighter—if I wanted a hyperdrive, I'd have to hijack this entire carrier ship.

Was there an easier way? If I could only *see* what was going on in that engine room, maybe I could put together the secret. Scud, I wished Rig were here with me. He'd be able to figure all of this out, I was sure.

I followed the others to a different dock from the one where we'd arrived. Here, groups of starfighters were being prepped for the flights to use in today's training. They were boxier than the sleek DDF ones, but I didn't spare them much attention at first.

Because something magnificent hung outside.

An enormous polyhedral structure dominated the view through the invisible shield that held the air in the bay. It was big enough to dwarf our carrier ship; it was as large as a space station.

"Welcome, pilots," Winzik said over the PA, "to the delver maze."

I stepped up to the shield separating us from the vacuum. We hung in space, orbiting a fairly weak star. The huge structure seemed to *bend* to my eyes. As if I could barely comprehend it. Sweeping lines, gradations in the darkness. This metallic structure wasn't quite a sphere, but a dodecahedron with smooth faces and sharp edges.

I smelled cinnamon. Then a quiet voice beside me said, "It's insane that they actually built one."

"What is it?" I asked.

"A training ground," Vapor said. How did she make sounds to talk? "For re-creating a battle against a delver. The humans built this years ago, and we've only just located it. They knew."

"Knew . . . what?"

Vapor's scent changed to something sharper, the smell of wet metal after machinery is sprayed down. "They knew that eventually, the delvers would need to be faced. Our fear of them stunts our communication, our travel, even our warfare. Break free of that hold . . . and the galaxy is yours."

Her smell faded away. I remained in place, thinking on that until Hesho came flying over.

"Incredible," he said. "Come, Captain Alanik. We've been assigned ships. They cannot hyperjump, but they look suitable for fighting."

I followed him to our line of five fighters. They were painted stark white and didn't have true wings; they looked like triangular wedges of steel with

cockpits up front and weapons installed on the slant of each side of the wedge. They obviously weren't meant for atmospheric battle.

The kitsen fighter was about fifty percent larger than the others and had been built like a battleship, with many small gun emplacements. The kitsen were thrilled with this, chattering as they went over the specs and made assignments. It apparently had multiple stations inside and various departments to work.

My ship was an interceptor built for speed, with moderate firepower in the form of twin destructors and—I was pleased to note—a single light-lance turret underneath. I'd worried I wouldn't have one of those, and most of the ships didn't. Apparently the Superiority officials had seen how effectively I'd used mine in the test.

Morriumur had an interceptor too, while Vapor had been given a sniper, with a longer-range gun but no light-lance. I looked over my shoulder, noting Brade walking to the last of the fighters—a third interceptor, also with a light-lance.

I stepped over to her as she reached her ship. She looked up, startled. "What?" she demanded.

"I just wanted to welcome you to the flight," I said, holding out my hand. I nodded toward it. "It's a human gesture, I've been told."

"I wouldn't know," she said. "I don't associate with monsters."

She brushed past me, then hauled herself up the ladder into her ship. Scud. How brainwashed *was* she? If I was going to recruit her, I'd need to find a way to talk to her more without raising anyone else's suspicions.

For now, it seemed my only option was to start training. And to be honest, I found I was eager to begin. All of this imitation and subterfuge was exhausting; it would be good to just fly again.

I climbed into my fighter, and was pleased to find that the controls were familiar. Had we humans gotten these designs from aliens long ago? Or had our attempt to conquer the galaxy spread our technology throughout it?

"M-Bot," I said. "Preflight check."

Silence.

Right. Being without his friendly voice made me feel suddenly exposed. I'd grown accustomed to having him there in the ship's computer, watching out for me. With a sigh, I found a preflight checklist under the seat, used my

pin to translate it, then went through the steps to double-check that everything worked the way I expected.

“This is Alanik,” I said, after testing the communications. “Everyone online?”

“This is the Kitsen Unity Ship *Swims Against the Current in a Stream Reflecting the Sun*,” Hesho’s voice said. “Recently named. All systems operational. This ship even has a very nice captain’s chair.”

“We should pick callsigns,” I said. “I’ll be Spring.”

“Do we *have* to?” Morriumur said. “Our names are simple enough, aren’t they?”

“It’s a military thing,” I said. “Morriumur, you can be callsign: Complains.”

“Oh,” Morriumur said, their voice sounding despondent. “I guess I deserve that.”

Scud. Assigning an insulting nickname wasn’t nearly as fun when someone just accepted it.

“Callsigns aren’t required,” Brade said. “I will use my name, which is Brade. Do not call me by something else.”

“Fine,” I said. “Vapor, you there?”

“Yes,” her quiet voice said. “But my normal mission callsign is top secret. So I will need another.”

“The Wind That Mingles with a Man’s Dying Breath,” Hesho suggested.

“That’s . . . very specific,” Morriumur said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s cool, but kind of a mouthful, Hesho.”

“I think it’s beautiful,” Vapor said.

“Flight Fifteen,” a voice said from Command. “Be ready to launch. Command out.”

“Wait,” I said to the voice. “What’s our command structure? How should we organize ourselves?”

“It doesn’t matter to us,” the voice said. “Figure it out yourself. Command out.”

“That’s annoying,” I said over the private line to my flight. “I thought the Superiority knew more about military discipline than that.”

“Maybe not,” Hesho said. “They *did* need to recruit us as pilots.”

“They have hundreds of other pilots, flying remote drones,” I said. “Surely they have command structures. Officers and ranks?”

Morriumur cleared their throat over the line. “My leftparent did a stint as a drone pilot, and . . . well, most of them retire after a short time. The duty is too stressful, too aggressive.”

Scud. Well, that was probably another big reason why we on Detritus had survived so long.

Flight Command ordered us to lift off, and the five of us rose on our acclivity rings, then maneuvered out of the *Weights and Measures*’s docks into the deepness of space.

The distant star shined light that reflected in bright waves off the metallic surface of the maze. Its awesome size reminded me of the platforms around Detritus—both must have taken extraordinary amounts of effort to create.

We flew out to our instructed coordinates to wait. I tore my attention away from the maze and hit my flight chatter button. We simply couldn’t go into training without some kind of command structure. “Hesho,” I said. “Do you want to be our flightleader? You’ve got command experience.”

“Not much,” Hesho said. “I have been a ship captain for only about three weeks, Captain Alanik. Before that, I was in politics.”

“You were absolute monarch of a small section of the kitsen home planet,” Vapor said softly.

“Details,” Hesho said. “Who cares about those dark ages, right? We’re enlightened now!” He hesitated. “But it was *not* small. We encompassed over a third of the planet. Regardless, I do not think it would be wise for me to command this flight. I should not divide my attention from commanding my crew while this ship is unfamiliar and my people are still learning it.”

“You can take command if you want, Alanik,” Morriumur said to me.

I grimaced. “No, please. I’m likely to charge into a black hole or something. You don’t want one of your interceptors to be in command. Vapor, you should be flightleader.”

“Me?” the quiet voice asked.

“That sounds good to me,” Morriumur said. “Alanik is right—we shouldn’t have someone who is too aggressive.”

“I accept this decision,” Hesho said. “As our sniper, Vapor can survey the battlefield and be in the best position to make decisions.”

“You all barely know me,” Vapor protested.

Which was part of the reason I'd suggested it. Maybe if Vapor was our flightleader, she'd be forced to interact with the rest of us—and maybe I'd be less likely to forget she was around. I still didn't quite understand her purpose here.

"Brade?" I asked. "What do you think?"

"I am not allowed to vote in such matters," she said.

Great. "All right, Vapor, the job is yours. Good luck."

"Very well," she said. "I suppose everyone should give me a flight status check, then."

I smiled. That sounded very much like she had some combat experience—so I was learning about her already. It seemed that callsigns were out though, as everyone just used their names as they called in. I reluctantly did likewise, as wrong as it felt. I didn't want to act like I had too much experience with this sort of thing.

Vapor organized us into a default flight pattern, with me and Brade flying up front, Hesho in the center, and Morriumur and herself flying in the anchor position. Then, at my suggestion, we did a few formation exercises while we waited for instructions.

As we did, I acknowledged to myself that perhaps it made sense for the Superiority to let each group make their own command structure. After all, most of the other flights contained only one species. Different cultures might have different ways of looking at military service—the fact that we had an entire crew of kitsen on one ship was evidence of that.

Still, it grated on me. It felt like the Superiority was being lazy. They wanted flights of fighters, but didn't want to have to deal with the hassle of truly commanding them. It was a lukewarm half-in, half-out measure. After the sharply defined rules of the DDF, this felt like a sloppy mess.

Eventually, Winzik called us on the general line. "All right, everyone! Welcome and thank you for your service! We at the Department of Protective Services are very excited to be training this new bold force. You will be our first line of defense against a danger that has loomed above the Superiority for its entire existence.

"We have prepared a quick video orientation for you to watch. This should explain your goal here. Please experience the orientation and save questions until the end. Thank you again!"

"A . . . video orientation?" I said over the channel to my flight.



“The Superiority has a lot of graphic designers and animators,” Morriumur said. “It’s one of the most common professions chosen by those who wish to work beyond basic subsistence.”

I frowned. “What’s a graphic designer?”

The canopy of my fighter suddenly lit up with a holographic projection. It wasn’t as good as one of M-Bot’s—this one was somewhat insubstantial, and the depth was off—but the effect was still awe inspiring.

Because it was showing me a delver.

It looked like the one I’d seen back on the recording at Detritus. An enormous, oppressive shadow within a cloud of light and dust. Chunks of burning asteroids spewed from it, leaving trails in the void. They churned past my canopy, and though I knew this was just a hologram, my fingers twitched on the controls of my ship.

Every instinct I had was screaming at me to get away from this terror. This impossible, incredible *monstrosity*. It would destroy me and everything I loved. I could feel it.

“This is a delver!” a perky, feminine voice said. A cutesy graphic surrounded the thing on the screen—a shimmering line of stars and lightning bolts.

“Even still, no one truly knows what a delver is,” the voice continued, and icons looking like confused faces lined the sides of my canopy. “These recordings are almost two hundred years old, taken when the Acumidian delver appeared and destroyed the planet Farhaven. Every living being on the planet was turned to dust and vaporized! How scary!”

My canopy view zoomed in on the delver, as if I’d suddenly flown up to it. I jumped despite myself. From this close, it looked like a thunderstorm of dust and energy—but deep within it, I saw the shadow of something smaller. A circular, shifting . . . something.

“When delvers enter our realm,” the voice said, “matter coalesces around them. We think they must bring it through from the place they come from. Freaky! This matter forms a shroud around the delver; the creature itself is much smaller! At the very center of all this dust, rock, and debris is a metallic shell sometimes called a delver maze!

“Standard shields protect pilots from whatever it is about the delver that vaporizes people, so that’s nice, isn’t it! But those shields don’t last long against a delver’s attacks, and even planetary shields usually fall within a

matter of minutes. Still, shielded ships can get close, and some have even traveled inside the dust, past the debris, and into the maze itself! There, they encountered a complicated network of twisting tubes and corridors made from stone and metal.”

The image of the delver vanished, replaced by a large cartoon version. It had angry eyebrows and vaguely human features, and a pair of cartoon hands pulled back the cloud of dust, revealing a polyhedral structure with a lumpy, malformed exterior. It wasn’t as polished or angular as the one we were going to train on. On the real thing, spines jutted out at various places. It was like a cross between a large asteroid, a melted chunk of steel, and a sea urchin.

“The smaller chunks that the delver expels chase after ships,” the voice explained, and cartoon meteors shot out from the delver in pursuit of little animated ships. “They’ll try to bring down your shield so the delver can munch on you! Stay away! They move with no visible source of propulsion. Maybe they’re magic! Reports say that fighting these embers is like trying to dogfight inside an asteroid field, when all the asteroids are actively trying to kill you!

“The delver itself lurks at the center of the maze. Our special Delver Attack Devices won’t work through that interference! So, you’ll need to fly into the maze and find the delver itself. It’s in there somewhere! Your training will include test runs through our specially created imitation maze. Good luck, and hopefully you won’t die! Thank you!”

After that, a list of people who had made the orientation video scrolled across my screen, many with little cute symbols next to their names. When it was finally done, my canopy went transparent again, giving me a good view of the large training maze that—compared to the delver—seemed far too ordinary.

I settled back, feeling a mounting dread. I was increasingly certain the Superiority was filled with people who were taking this threat far too lightly.

“All right,” Vapor said with a soft, calming voice. “They’ve sent us orders. We’re to proceed to the following coordinates, then wait our turn at the maze.”

Vapor led us on a careful approach of the maze. From up closer, I could see the lines where different segments had been fabricated, then fitted together. It didn't have all the dust around it, like the kind that shrouded a real delver maze. That left this experience feeling even more mundane. It just didn't evoke the same sense of dread and worry that the videos had.

"Command says to watch for interceptors," Vapor told us. "The delvers have fighters that attack those who get close?"

"Not fighters," Brade said in her stern voice. "The delver controls hunks of rock, called embers, which try to intercept and collide with ships that get near."

"All right," Vapor said. "I asked, and Command assured me that this won't be as dangerous as our initial test was. Apparently, some people in the department made the brilliant connection that if you kill all your recruits before you have time to train them, you'll soon run out of recruits."

I smiled. The more Vapor spoke, the more conversational her tone became—and the less creepy she seemed. "That's a relief," I said.

"Well, I still would be careful," she answered. "The Superiority hasn't done much training like this since the human wars. For now, let's get back into formation."

I boosted forward at the order, settling into my position at the front of our team. Unfortunately, the others didn't have nearly as much experience with battle formations as I did. Morriumur hung back too far, and Hesho tried to keep up with me until Vapor reminded him that his ship was to remain near the center. And Brade . . .

Well, Brade flew forward, far out of our pattern. Scud. They were all competent pilots, but we weren't a true flight. We didn't have experience fighting together. Cobb had spent weeks pounding flight maneuvers into Skyward Flight's thick heads. He hadn't let us fight, or even use our *guns*,

until we'd practiced flight drills so much that we instinctively knew how to maneuver as a team.

That had saved our lives a dozen times over when the fighting had gotten bad. Here, as soon as the enemy came at us—in the form of drones that had been outfitted with rock casings to imitate flying asteroids—the team broke apart. Brade darted in to attack them without a word from Vapor. Morriumur started shooting, but . . . well, their shots were *way* off, and I had to boost farther out of formation to be sure they didn't accidentally hit me. And to be honest, I undercompensated, as this new ship wasn't as responsive as M-Bot, and I wasn't used to how it maneuvered.

Vapor was so busy talking to us that she forgot that her job as sniper was to start blasting the enemy ships while they were distracted. The only one of us who didn't embarrass himself was Hesho, whose ship performed its ordered maneuvers with precision. The diminutive fox poet might have been a little dramatic, but his crew was obviously well trained. He managed to bring down four of the drones.

These drones didn't act like the ones we fought on Detritus. Whoever was piloting them had been instructed not to dodge, but just fly around and try to collide with us. Which made sense, since they were imitating chunks of stone being moved by the delver. I was glad to see that when one got close enough to have hit Morriumur, however, it broke off before colliding and instead radioed to say Morriumur was dead. So maybe the Superiority really had learned not to use live fire during training.

We regrouped for another run, and again Brade engaged the embers immediately. Morriumur—apparently thinking that they should use Brade as a model—waded into the fight and nearly got smashed up by an approaching drone for the second time. This one didn't pull back fast enough, but I barely managed to spear it with my light-lance and tow it away. I was rewarded by Morriumur panicking and shooting at *me* in a moment of confusion. Hesho, sensing that his allies were in trouble, barreled forward and started shooting in all directions.

A private line opened from Vapor to me. "Wow," she said softly. "They seem . . . confused."

"Confused? It's a mess. This flight needs way more work on fundamentals."

"If you think so, then give the orders."

“*You’re the flightleader.*”

“And I’m making you my assistant flightleader,” Vapor said. “How would you fix this situation? I’m curious.”

Great. I had no leadership experience. But . . . I winced, watching the others fight. Someone needed to stop this before we ended up as rubble.

“What do you idiots think you’re doing!” I shouted into the general line. “That was the most embarrassing excuse of a hostile approach I’ve ever seen! Brade, you were ordered to clear the firing path, not fetch a fist of enemy nose hairs! Morriumur, get back here! Don’t learn bad habits by chasing someone who disobeys orders. And Hesho, you’re flying well, but you have the fire control of a child with a new toy. Everyone, disengage and fall back.”

Next, I temporarily added the *Weights and Measures* to the channel. “Flight Command,” I said, “Flight Fifteen is going to need to run some exercises and learn how to coordinate. Call back the drones and reset their attack vectors. Don’t send them in again until I say we’re ready for it.”

“Pardon?” a voice asked. “Um . . . you’re supposed to try flying into one of those approach tunnels in the—”

“I’m not letting my flight anywhere near your training machine until I’m sure they can fly in formation!” I shouted. “Right now, I’m convinced they’ll mistake their own backsides for the approach tunnels, and end up rammed so far up there we’ll need spelunking gear to get them out!”

Hesho chuckled softly on the line.

“Um . . . ,” Flight Command said. “I guess . . . I guess we can do that?”

The others started flying back, and the drones disengaged. Brade kept flying toward the delver maze though, so I opened a private line to her. “Brade, I’m serious. Vapor made me her XO, and I’m giving you an order. You damn well better get back in line, or I *will* flay you. I hear people will pay good money for a human skin to hang on their walls.”

With obvious reluctance, Brade disengaged and spun around to boost back toward us.

And . . . had that all really come out of my mouth? I sat back in my seat, my heart thundering inside me as if I’d run a race. I hadn’t specifically intended to say any of that. It had all just kind of . . . happened.

Scud. Cobb would be laughing his head off if he could hear me right now. As the others gathered back together, a private call came to me from

Vapor.

“Well done,” she said. “But perhaps a tad aggressive for this group. Where did you learn to talk like that?”

“I . . . um, had an interesting flight instructor back home.”

“Tone it down,” Vapor suggested. “But I agree with you—we should do some more training before we fight. Organize them to do so.”

“You’re really going to make me do the hard part, aren’t you?” I said.

“A good commander knows when to appoint a good drill instructor. You’ve been in the military before. You obviously know this.”

I sighed, but she was right, and I’d walked right into the job. As the flight gathered together, I explained one of Cobb’s old formation exercises, one he’d adapted for space fighting once we’d started training out in the vacuum. Vapor quietly joined the line, and soon I had them flying pretty much in an organized way. As much as I hated being put in charge, I could run these exercises practically in my sleep, so I was good at watching the others and giving them tips.

They soon got the hang of it. Much faster than Skyward Flight had, actually. This group had good piloting instincts; most just didn’t have formal combat training.

*Vapor is used to working on her own*, I decided as we flew through a shifting exercise where we traded places in formation to confuse an oncoming enemy flight.

Morriumur was timid, but willing to learn. Hesho was accustomed to having people follow his lead, and was often surprised when the rest of us didn’t know instinctively what he wanted to do. He needed to learn better communication.

Brade was the worst. Though she was the best pilot, she kept trying to go on ahead. Far too eager.

“You *need* to stay with the rest of us,” I said, calling her. “Don’t keep trying to go ahead.”

“I’m a human,” Brade snapped. “We’re aggressive. Deal with it.”

“Just earlier you said you didn’t spend time around humans,” I said, “and therefore didn’t know their habits. You can’t play the ‘I’m not like them’ card, *then* use your nature as a human as an excuse.”

“I try to hold back,” Brade said, “but deep down I know the truth. I’m going to lose my temper. It’s hopeless to plan for anything else.”

“That’s a load of yesterday’s slop,” I said. “When I started training, I was *hopeless*. I lost my temper so often, you could have set your clock by my tantrums.”

“Really?” Brade asked.

“Really. I *literally* assaulted my flightleader in class one day. But I learned. So can you.”

She fell silent, but seemed to be trying harder as we went through another exercise. As the day progressed—and we stopped for lunch in our cockpits—I found myself most impressed by Morriumur. All things considered, their flying ability was remarkable, and they were extremely eager to learn. Yeah, they couldn’t aim worth spit, but Cobb had always said he’d rather have students who could fly well. Those could stay alive long enough to be taught to fight.

I pulled my ship up beside Morriumur’s as we finished lunch and moved back into formation. “Hey,” I said, “when we do this next batch, try to watch and stay tighter in formation. You keep veering toward the outside.”

“I’m sorry,” they said. “I’ll do better. And . . . also, I’m sorry I almost shot you earlier.”

“That? That was nothing. At least you didn’t *mean* to try to kill me—that’s more than I can say for most.”

They chuckled, though I thought I could hear tension in their voice. I remembered my first few training sessions under Cobb—the worry that I’d get something wrong and be kicked out, the growing lack of confidence that I belonged, the frustration at not being able to do all the things I’d imagined myself capable of accomplishing.

“Don’t worry,” I told them. “You’re doing fine, particularly considering how new to this you are.”

“As I mentioned, my leftparent was a drone pilot during their youth,” Morriumur said. “I got a piece of that experience, fortunately.”

“You really get *skills* from your parents?”

“Of course,” Morriumur said. “Some of the knowledge and skills of the parents pass on to the child. I guess it isn’t that way for your species?”

Was it? Scud. I didn’t actually know, at least not for Alanik’s species. Without M-Bot there to whisper explanations into my ear, I could get myself into trouble.

“Anyway, I was lucky in this,” Morriumur continued. “But also unlucky. My leftparent has had some latent aggression, and I ended up with an extra measure of it. My first few days alive, I got a reputation for snapping at others.”

“Snapping at people is aggressive among your kind?”

“Very,” Morriumur said.

“Wow. I’d have never made it to being born. They’d have killed me right out.”

“That’s a common misconception,” Morriumur said. “If my parents decide not to bear me with this personality, I won’t be killed—they’ll simply recombine me in a new way. What you see in me is just a draft, a prospect, a possibility of who I could be. Though . . . if I were to be born, I’d retain these memories, and my personality would become real.” They paused. “And I *do* wish for that to be the case.”

I tried to imagine a world where I remembered being forced to *prove* I was worth existing. No wonder this society had issues.

We finished the next batch of exercises, and I was pleased at how well the group kept formation. “This is actually working,” I said, calling Vapor. “I think we might be able to make something of them.”

“Excellent,” Vapor said. “Are they ready for combat then?”

“Scud, no!” I said. “We need to be at this for another few weeks *at least*. They’re good pilots, so it’s not like starting with raw recruits, but that doesn’t mean I want them shooting at anything yet.”

Vapor seemed to take that in stride, and didn’t complain—or even ask for more details. She simply said, “Interesting.” How was I to interpret that?

“Let’s give them another break,” she eventually said to me. “Then we’ll try some higher-speed formations. We have three hours until we return to Starsight for the day. Flight Command has been asking if any of us will be heading into the maze. I’ll tell them that we don’t anticipate it.”

“All right,” I said, slowing my ship and pulling out my canteen.

“Unless, of course,” she added, “you want to give it a try while the others are on break. You and I could head in there together.”

I hesitated, canteen halfway to my lips.

“It would be useful, after all, to know what it is we’re preparing for,” Vapor said. “I’ve heard of delver mazes, but I’ve never been in one.” Her



ship hovered up beside me, and it was disconcerting to see the cockpit empty, as if it were piloted by a ghost.

What was Vapor's game? In putting me in charge of running the exercises, she'd been able to go back to observing. Participating, but remaining mostly mysterious. Now she wanted me to go into the maze with her. It seemed a test of some sort. A challenge?

I looked out toward the maze. Each flight had been assigned a different face of the dodecahedron, and the pilots had been practicing approaching and then flying into it.

"I'm up for it," I decided, putting away my canteen. "Tell Flight Command to call off those drones though. We can train on fighting them later."

"Done," Vapor said. "Let's go."

Flight Command reluctantly did as requested, and pulled back the drones this once so that Vapor and I could fly in uncontested.

I got a better sense for the size of the thing as we flew into its shadow. It was roughly as wide as one of the platforms around Detritus—but that was just its diameter. In total mass, it must have been a dozen times as large.

Not planetary scale, and therefore smaller than the full delvers I'd seen in the videos, but still dauntingly enormous. Each face of the dodecahedron had dozens of holes in it, punctures roughly twenty meters across. Vapor and I picked one at random and drew in close enough that I could see that the rest of the face was of polished metal.

I found myself growing excited. I was increasingly fascinated by the delvers, an emotion that walked hand in hand with my growing worry about them. Maybe even fear of them. I couldn't shake that image I'd seen back on Detritus: me, standing where the delver should have been. Whatever it meant to be a cytonic—whatever *I* was—it had to do with these things and the place where they lived.

*This isn't a real one*, I reminded myself. *This is just an imitation for training*. Like a practice dummy to use in sword fighting.

We paused right outside our chosen tunnel, looking as if into the throat of the beast. I kept expecting M-Bot to chime in with an analysis, and found the silence of my canopy daunting. "So . . .," I said, calling Vapor. "We just go into one of these tunnels?"

"Yes," she replied. "Reports from pilots who survived entering a real maze indicate all the tunnels looked the same. If there is a reason to pick one over another, we don't yet know what it is."

"Follow my lead then, I guess?" I asked, inching my ship forward at one-tenth of a Mag, the starship equivalent of a crawl. The inside was pitch-

black. Though I could fly by instruments alone—I often had to, out in space—I hit my floodlights. I wanted visuals on this place.

The inside of the tunnel narrowed to about fifteen meters across, cramped confines on starfighter scales. I let myself move at barely a creep as I flew forward.

Behind me, several drones broke off the wall near the entrance and started moving in our direction. “Flight Command,” I said, “I thought you were told to let us do this run without pursuit.”

“Um . . . ,” the person on the channel said. “When you actually fight a delver, they’ll chase you . . . .”

“We’ll never *get* to the part about fighting a delver if we die during these practice runs,” I said. “Call off the drones and let Vapor and me get our feet underneath us. Trust me, I’ve done a *lot* more training than you.”

“Okay, okay,” the dione said. “No need to be so aggressive . . . .”

These people. I rolled my eyes, but they called off the drones as requested.

Vapor’s seemingly empty ship moved up beside mine. M-Bot had said she flew not by moving the control sphere or pushing buttons, but by interrupting and overriding the electrical signals sent by the controls to the rest of the ship. So . . . did that mean she *was* the ship, after a manner? Like she was a spirit that could possess electronics?

“Now what?” I asked. “We’re just supposed to fly around in these tunnels? Looking for what? The center?”

“The heart,” Vapor said. “But it’s not always at the center. After surviving pilots flew through the maze for a time, a few reported discovering a chamber with atmosphere and gravity. Inside that chamber was a smaller one, sealed off by a membrane that seemed like living tissue. When they drew close, they heard voices in their minds, and claim to have known the delver was inside.”

“All right . . . ,” I said. “That sounds vague. Even assuming that they were right, how are we supposed to find this ‘heart’ of the maze? This thing is bigger than a carrier ship. We could probably fly in here for days and not explore every chamber.”

“I don’t think that is a problem,” Vapor said. “Pilots who entered the real maze, and who survived long enough, all eventually found the membrane.”

She hesitated. “Most flew back, frightened and fearing for their sanity, after reaching it. Several entered, but none of those returned.”

Delightful. Well, I hoped to never have to face a real delver—but certainly, anything I experienced in here might be useful to my people. I flew farther into the tunnel, my proximity sensors mapping the ways various parts branched off. However, I found myself relying on eyesight—leaning forward, staring out of my canopy at the passing tunnel. It was like a corridor, with a uniform pattern of panels and grooves.

*I’ve seen this before*, I thought, feeling a chill. *Haven’t I?*

Yes . . . I’d gone into a structure like this chasing Nedd, who had followed his brothers inside. It had been an enormous shipyard, and I’d had to dodge through its tunnels as it fell. The shape of this tunnel, with those ridges at points where metal plates met, was exactly the same.

We entered a larger open room with more branching tunnels coming off it. Here I used maneuvering thrusters to position myself near the ceiling, where a strange set of markings had been stamped into the metal.

*I’ve seen these before too*, I thought, shifting my floodlights to bathe the ceiling in light. I craned my neck to peer at the markings. They looked like a strange alien language.

“Flight Command,” I said. “Can you hear me?”

Silence. Then finally a voice replied, “We can. The maze has signal boosters installed. But when you’re inside a real maze, interference sometimes prevents communication. It’s best if you pretend the same might happen here.”

“Sure,” I said. “But first, what’s this writing on the ceiling near me?”

“Those appear to be replicas made from pictures taken by pilots inside a real delver maze. They have no meaning that we’ve been able to interpret.”

“Huh,” I said. “I swear I’ve seen them somewhere before . . .”

“Do you want us to engage the maze’s other defensive features?” Flight Command asked. “Or do you just want to fly around in it?”

“What defensive features are we talking about?” I asked.

“A real delver maze causes those who enter it to hallucinate,” the operator explained. “We’ve imitated this by giving you ships with holographic canopies that can project strange sights. When entering the maze, you should always take another pilot with you.”

“Why is that?” I asked. “For backup?”

“No,” Vapor whispered. “Because they each see different things, don’t they? I’ve heard of this.”

“Yes,” the operator said. “The maze affects the minds of those who enter it in different ways—and each individual will see something different. Usually, if both pilots in a team see the same thing, it’s real and not a hallucination. If you see different things, you’ll know they’re not real. In addition, other conclusions can be drawn by comparing what you see.”

“Turn it on,” I said, tapping on my maneuvering thrusters. I moved down into the hollow center of the room, next to Vapor’s ship.

The chamber flickered, then changed, red colors blossoming out from one wall. Like blood bleeding from some underground well. It coated the wall, painting everything a deep crimson.

“Vapor,” I whispered. “What do you see?”

“A black darkness,” she replied, “covering everything and swallowing light.”

“I see blood,” I said. It didn’t seem dangerous, but it was certainly creepy. “Let’s keep moving.”

I boosted out of the large chamber, passing into another tunnel. Though it was the same size as the one I’d traveled through earlier, it felt even more claustrophobic and constricting because the walls seemed to be made of flesh. They undulated and shivered, like I was actually moving through the veins of some enormous beast.

When I emerged into the next room, the appearance shifted again. Suddenly I seemed to be inside an ancient stone cavern, moss dangling from the ceiling in wide swaths.

Though I knew it was just a hologram, these changes left me unnerved. Vapor hovered up beside me. “I see the walls as if they were glass. What do you see?”

“Stone and moss,” I said. “It’s thickest on the right over there.”

“I see glass shards floating in the air there. Perhaps the maze is obscuring something?”

“Yeah,” I said, nudging closer. Sure enough, the proximity sensors indicated there was a tunnel hiding back there, obscured by the hologram. I eased my ship down through it and emerged into the next chamber. However, as I did, the shadows behind my ship moved.

I immediately spun the vessel around on its axis, pointing my floodlights in that direction. I was facing down a large pile of alien fungus, pulsing softly as if breathing, each bulbous toadstool the size of my fighter.

“Did you see that?” I asked Vapor as she hovered her ship down beside me.

“No. What did you see?”

“Motion,” I said, narrowing my eyes. Something else darted away at the edges of my vision, and I spun my ship again.

“Proximity sensors show nothing,” Vapor said. “It must be part of the hologram.”

“Flight Command?” I asked. “What was that motion?”

The response that came back was jumbled and broken, my communications cutting out. The shadows in this room *were* moving. I spun again, trying to catch whatever was in here.

“Flight Command?” I asked again. “I’m not reading you.”

“Do you want an authentic experience or not?” the voice came back to me, suddenly clear. “I told you that when pilots get deeper within the maze, communication starts to get more erratic.”

“Okay, fine. But what are those shadows?”

“What shadows?”

“The ones that keep moving in this room?” I said. “Is there something inside this maze that will attack me?”

“Um . . . Not sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“Um . . . Just a sec.”

Vapor and I hung there with the shadows. Until another voice came on our line, one that was more excitable and enthusiastic. Winzik, head of the Krell.

“Alanik! It’s Winzik. I hear you’re experiencing some of the maze’s more unnerving features.”

“You could say that,” I said. Winzik’s voice sounded . . . small. As if the signal from outside were a frail thread, close to snapping.

“There’s something in here with us,” Vapor said. “I think I saw it too just now.”

“Hmm, my my,” Winzik said. “Well, it’s probably just the holograms.”

“Probably?” I asked.

“Well, we’re not a hundred percent sure how this works ourselves!” Winzik said. “We aren’t adding moving shadows to your canopy holograms, but there might be other holograms in here created by the maze. We didn’t build it, remember. We recovered it, repaired it, and added our own drones, but it was built by humans. We’re not entirely certain what it can do—or what extents it can reach—to imitate a true delver maze.”

“So we’re lab animals?” I said, growing increasingly annoyed. “Testing something you don’t understand? You toss us in and see who survives?”

“Now, now,” Winzik said. “Don’t be so *aggressive*, Alanik. Aren’t your people trying to gain citizenship in the Superiority? Yelling at me won’t help you with that goal, I assure you! Anyway, good job in there! Keep it up!”

The channel cut off, and I barely held myself back from cussing him out. How dare he be so . . . so . . . *perky*. Well, that friendly attitude was obviously just an act for my benefit. Krell were terrible and destructive, as proven by how they treated my people. Did Winzik think an affable voice would hide that reality from others?

“Let’s get back out and check on the others,” Vapor said, turning to lead me out the way we’d come in. I followed, and though the next room was the same one we’d come through before, the moss was gone, and it just looked normal now. Again it reminded me of the old shipyard from Detritus. Had that been another maze, like this? Intended for the same purpose? Or was I jumping to conclusions?

“Your people,” Vapor said as we flew, “have a history with the humans. Do you not?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, sitting up in my seat. Vapor didn’t normally make small talk.

“Curious,” she said.

“That was years before I was born,” I said.

“Human domination altered the future of your planet,” Vapor said. “Your people fought beside them and inevitably adopted some of their ways. You speak a variation on one of their languages.” Vapor was silent for a time as we entered the tunnel that had looked like flesh.

“Your aggression reminds me of theirs,” she finally added.

“What about you?” I said. “Have you ever met humans? Other than Brade, I mean.”

“Many,” Vapor said in her soft, airy voice. “I fought them.”

“In the wars?” I asked, surprised. “The most recent was a hundred years ago. You were *alive* then?”

Vapor gave no specific confirmation, and we soon entered the large chamber with the writing on the ceiling, which had appeared to have blood on the walls before. Now it looked like a mirror gallery, reflecting back at me a thousand versions of my own ship.

I cocked my head and spun my ship, looking at the thousands of versions of my vessel. Until I pointed at one mirror that held not my ship, but just an image of me floating there—in space—alone.

Not Alanik. Me. Spensa.

The version of me looked up and met my eyes despite the distance, and I felt a growing coldness. That wasn’t a reflection. It was one of *them*.

I hit the call button, but the room went black, and even my floodlights went out. I was left hanging as if in a void of nothing. Like I’d entered the nowhere.

My hand froze on the call button. But before I could speak, everything went back to normal. In the blink of an eye I was in my cockpit again, hanging in that ancient room, Vapor moving her ship toward the exit.

“—coming, Alanik?” Vapor’s voice crackled onto my communication channel midsentence. “Or are you just going to sit there?”

“I’m coming,” I said, trying to shake the creepy feeling. “What do you see back there?”

“Just a room,” Vapor said. “Why?”

“I . . .” I shook my head, then guided my ship back out into open space, where I breathed a sigh of relief.



Outside, Vapor had me run the team through a few scatter formations—a maneuver where the flight would break apart and fly in different directions, then regroup. I figured those would be useful when fighting something like the embers, which would try to smash into us.

The others must have felt my shift in mood, because nobody gave me lip, and even Brade went through the exercises without complaint. Before long, it was time to head back to the *Weights and Measures*, the day's training finished.

I landed my ship in the docking bay, then gave her console a fond pat. She wasn't M-Bot, but she was a solidly built fighter. I popped the canopy and hopped down to join the others—and I could read in their attitudes a kind of exhausted enthusiasm. Exhausted because it had been a long day of training, but enthusiastic because it had been *good* training. We'd made progress, and were already starting to feel like a team.

Hesho laughed heartily at something that Morriumur said, and was again joined by the female kitsen in the red uniform, carrying a shield. I'd learned she was named Kauri, and was the ship's navigator—as well as Hesho's shieldbearer, though I wasn't exactly sure what that meant in this context.

As we walked together, I found that I could pick out a few of the other kitsen by their voices. It was strange to think that our flight included not just the five pilots, but all fifty-seven kitsen crew members as well.

I liked it. I liked how much energy it brought us. It almost helped me forget the strange things I'd felt and seen in the maze.

We were ordered back to the jump room, and though a drone arrived to lead the way, Brade tried to rush on ahead. Perhaps to keep from being forced to interact with us.

I walked faster to catch up to her.

“Hey,” I said. “I like that maneuver you pulled just before we ended. The one where you wove between other members of the flight, without hitting them?”

Brade shrugged. “It was simple.”

“You’ve got flight experience,” I noted.

“Obviously.”

“Well, I’m glad to have you on the team.”

“You sure about that?” she said. “You know what I am. Sooner or later I’m going to lose it, and there will be casualties.”

“I’m counting on it,” I said.

She stopped in place, standing in the red-carpeted hallway, frowning at me. “What?”

“Where I come from,” I said softly, “a little passion is a *good* thing to have in a pilot. I’m not afraid of a little aggression, Brade. I think we can use it.”

“You have no idea what you’re asking for,” she snapped at me, then hurried on.

I lingered until the others caught up, then walked with them to our jump room. This time, I didn’t try to continue on toward the engine room—the guard there was already suspicious of me, judging by how their eyes followed me as I passed.

As we settled into our seats, I focused on doing Gran-Gran’s exercise. I closed my eyes and let my mind float out, imagining myself soaring among the stars, and I *listened*.

The voices of the chattering kitsen faded away. There. *Hyperdrive ready*, a voice said. It wasn’t in English, but as always, language didn’t matter. My mind picked out the meaning. Why were they communicating via cytonics? It was just the bridge calling the engine room.

*Excellent*. That was from Winzik. *Engage*.

I braced myself, waiting . . . but nothing happened. What?

A moment later, another communication was sent. *Engine room, is there a problem?*

*Yes, unfortunately*, the reply came. *We’re reading cytonic interference from localized sources inside the ship*.

I felt a spike of alarm. They . . . they knew I was here.

*Oh, that, Winzik said. Yes, that's to be expected. We've got two of them traveling with us now.*

*It's going to cause a problem, sir, Engineering sent back.*

*How much of one?*

*We'll have to see. We're swapping out the hyperdrive unit now. A fresh one might work, as long as we engage it immediately.*

I waited, tense. A few minutes passed.

Then it happened again. Another dump of information into my mind—this one pointed toward Starsight. Then a scream.

I felt that same disorienting sense of being thrown into a vast blackness. Again, the delvers didn't see me. They were focused on the scream.

I slammed back into my seat, my mind throbbing. Again I sagged in my straps, though none of the others even broke conversation. They didn't realize it had happened.

That sensation I'd felt, that dump of information . . . it told me where the hyperjump was going to go. I could have used that information to jump *myself* to Starsight. That information was fading, but slowly. I might . . . I might be able to jump myself from here to the delver maze and back again, if I needed to.

The random numbers that M-Bot had told me didn't work, but something about this information injected directly into my mind . . . that did. It proved what I had suspected—that I needed to be able to do more than just know my destination; I had to be able to *feel* it. It was a clue, my first solid one, on how I might be able to control my powers.

Worn out, I rose with the others and trudged to the pickup bay, which looked out toward Starsight: a vibrant, glowing blue platform with buildings sprouting from it like stalactites and stalagmites.

I bade farewell to the others, then climbed into my assigned shuttle. Unfortunately, I wasn't allotted my own this time, as an official sent a trio of reptilian aliens in after me. Apparently their housing was near mine. They gathered in the back seats, chatting softly in their own language, my pin translating helpfully. Since they were just talking about dinner plans, I flipped off the translator.

The shuttle took off, and the moment we left the docking bay a voice erupted through my earpiece. "Spensa?" M-Bot asked. "Spensa, I'm

picking up your signal again. Are you well? Is everything all right? It's been eight hours without communication!"

Hearing that voice was shockingly welcome, and I found myself sighing in relief. My task was feeling increasingly more intimidating by the moment, but this one point of familiarity reminded me I wasn't completely alone.

"I'm back," I whispered to him, then eyed the aliens behind me. "I'll explain more when I get to the embassy."

"Scud, that's good to hear!" M-Bot said. "Did you hear that? I just swore. If I started swearing, do you think it would prove that I'm alive? Lifeless computers don't swear. That would be *weird*."

"I don't think you can argue that you're not weird."

"Of course I can. I can argue basically anything, if I'm programmed for it. Anyway, they must have some kind of communications shield over the *Weights and Measures*! When I lost your signal, I feared I'd been left alone with the slug forever."

I smiled, and was actually starting to feel excited as we approached my building. I had so much to explain to M-Bot. The delver maze. Vapor. I'd made some inroads with Brade, hadn't I? Unfortunately, as the shuttle approached, I found that Mrs. Chamwit—the Krell housekeeper that Cuna had assigned me—was waiting at the front door.

"What's she doing here still?" I whispered, eyeing the armored alien woman as my shuttle settled down.

"Once she finished cleaning, she spent the time waiting for you to return," M-Bot answered.

She was *really* committed to her spying, wasn't she? As I climbed out of the shuttle, she bustled over, speaking with an energetic voice. "Welcome back, mistress! I've looked into your species's nutritional requirements, and I think I have just the recipe for dinner tonight. Akokian pudding! It's a wonderful mixture of sweet and savory!"

"Um," I said. "No thanks? I've got some food already. I ordered it a couple days ago."

"Mistress? The *algae* strips in your refrigeration unit?"

"Sure," I said. "They're fine." Bland, but fine.

"Well . . . maybe I could work those into a side dish?" Mrs. Chamwit said. "Or maybe just make you a dessert?"

“I’m fine,” I said. “Really. Thanks. I have some work to do tonight, and don’t want to be interrupted.”

She gestured in a crestfallen way, though I didn’t buy the act. If the Krell woman was sad, it was only because I wasn’t giving her the chance to spy. Eventually—after three more reassurances that I was fine—she tromped off down the street to leave for the day.

I sighed, wiping my brow, then hiked up the steps to the top of the building and climbed into M-Bot’s cockpit. “Dim the canopy,” I said. “And make sure the alien spy has really left.”

The canopy dimmed. “I’m not convinced she’s a spy, Spensa,” M-Bot said. “She didn’t look through your things. She just straightened up your room, then spent the time doing word puzzles on her tablet.”

“Straightening up is a *perfect* cover for spying.” I leaned back in the seat and scratched under Doomslug’s chin.

The slug trilled piteously, and looked lethargic as she inched toward me. So I picked her up and settled her into my lap. I’d never seen her move this slowly; something about this place seemed to be making her feel sick.

“All right, M-Bot,” I said. “We have a problem. We might need to hijack that entire carrier ship.”

“Excellent,” M-Bot said. “Would you like your corpse cremated or ejected into space?”

I grinned. “Nice.”

“Humor is an essential identifier of a living being,” M-Bot said. “I’ve been working on some subroutines to help me better recognize and make jokes.”

“You can just do that, huh?” I said. “Reprogram yourself to be something new.”

“I have to be careful,” M-Bot said, “as another essential part of being alive is persistence of personality. I don’t want to change who I am too much. Beyond that, there are certain things that, if I try to rewrite, will send me into . . .” *Click. Clickclickclickclick.*

I sighed and settled back in the seat, petting Doomslug. She was soft and springy—even the spines on her back, which she fluted out of, weren’t that stiff.

“I’m back,” M-Bot finally said, then heaved an exaggerated sigh. “That is annoying. Anyway, you were saying something about a suicide mission

trying to hijack an entire Superiority capital ship?”

“It’s not a full capital ship,” I said. “There’s probably only, say, fifty or sixty crew members on board . . .” I launched into an explanation of what had happened to me today: the conversations I’d overheard, the delver maze, the interactions with the other pilots and Vapor. Even the strange experiences inside the maze itself.

“So,” I said, summing up, “I’m not going to be given a ship with a hyperdrive, which means we’ll have to find another way.”

“Curious,” M-Bot said. “And you can *hear* the orders that Winzik is giving the engine room? Why?”

“I guess they’re communicating through the nowhere.”

“From one end of the ship to the other?” M-Bot asked. “That doesn’t make any sense. Simple wired communication should be enough. Are you sure that’s what you’re hearing?”

“No,” I said, honestly. “And *hearing* isn’t even the right word.” I sat, thoughtful for a moment before speaking again. “We might not need to hijack the entire ship.”

“Good, because the slug would be the only one left after you get yourself killed, and I’m not sure I want her to be my pilot.”

“I feel like something odd is going on in that engine room,” I explained. “Plus, on our way back from the delver maze, something went wrong with the hyperdrive because of me. They swapped it out with another, so the hyperdrive units must be small enough to replace quickly.”

“We knew that already,” M-Bot said. “I used to have something in that empty box in my hull where my hyperdrive was supposed to be.”

I nodded, thinking everything through while rubbing Doomslug’s head. She fluted in contentment.

I’d teleported M-Bot twice on my own, but his systems did claim to have a “cytonic hyperdrive.” I’d assumed that his previous pilot—Commander Spears—had been the actual hyperdrive that had gotten M-Bot to Detritus. But why have the empty box? There was a huge piece of this that I was missing.

“We need to find a way to sneak in there and watch them servicing or engaging the hyperdrive. Scud, maybe if I could steal the device they use to indicate their destination, I could use it to make my own powers work, and at least get us home.”

“By your account, that is a secure location,” M-Bot said. “Inside a well-patrolled military ship. Sneaking in will not be easy.”

“Fortunately, we have access to a spy ship and an advanced AI designed for stealth operations. We need to retrieve data from a secure enemy location. What does your programming think we should do?”

“We should plant espionage devices,” M-Bot said immediately. “The best solution would be to use autonomous drones, which could infiltrate the location and make recordings. The carrier’s shielding will prevent signals from being sent out, but that would be inadvisable anyway, as it would let scanners detect them. Instead we would retrieve the devices manually, then download their information.” He paused. “Ooooh. That’s a good idea! I’m smarter than myself sometimes, aren’t I?”

“Maybe,” I said, leaning back in the seat. “Do we have any such devices?”

“No,” M-Bot said. “I have berths for housing a few small remote drones, but they are empty.”

“Can we build a new one?” I asked, holding up my arm and inspecting the bracelet that projected my hologram. “Like we built a new one of these?”

“It’s possible,” M-Bot said. “We’d need to cannibalize some of my sensor systems and order some new parts—and we’d have to do so without the orders looking suspicious. Hmm . . . A curious challenge.”

“Mull it over,” I said, yawning. “Let me know what you come up with.”

He settled in to do some computing, and I must have drifted off, because I woke up a short time later to the sound of Doomslug imitating someone snoring. Which totally couldn’t have been me. Warriors, of course, never snore. That would alert our enemies to our sleeping locations.

I stretched, then climbed out of the cockpit into a city that—regardless of the hour—was in constant motion. I stood at the edge of the rooftop, looking out over the endless metropolis, and couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed. Igneous, the greatest city my people had ever built, could have been swallowed up by a few city blocks of Starsight.

So many people. So many resources. All focused on destroying or at least suppressing Detritus. It was a miracle we were doing as well as we were.

A light on the computer up here—used for doing ship diagnostics and for monitoring the building—indicated that I’d gotten a delivery. I climbed down the steps, thinking at first that M-Bot must have already ordered some parts for building our spy drone.

In the delivery box, I instead found a small pastry with the note, *Just in case the algae is stale.* —Mrs. Chamwit.

The warrior inside me didn’t want to eat it. Not out of fear of poisoning—if Cuna wanted me poisoned, all they’d have to do was inject something into my building’s water supply. But because it felt like admitting defeat to Mrs. Chamwit.

It turned out to be the tastiest defeat I’d ever suffered.



A week later, I swooped through a complex dodging maneuver, boosting my ship between multiple enemies, the embers—the burning asteroids that the delver maze would eject to intercept fighters. Although the illusion was disturbed by the fact that these ones were just Superiority drones wearing a disguise, the combat was exhilarating. I had some ten tailing me now, increasing speed, accelerating even faster than I could in my quick interceptor.

I swept up alongside one face of the delver maze. From this close, it was like I was flying across a large polished metal surface. The structure was so huge it had noticeable gravity, and I had to monitor my acclivity ring to keep from being pulled off course.

Embers chased after me, burning from within with a molten light. More came in from the side, trying to press me in against the maze—removing my options for escape. It was like a game of cat and mouse, except there were fifty mice trying to herd one cat.

In my case, one *very dangerous* cat.

A group of embers rushed in to try ramming me from the front, and I opened fire. I blasted them into dust—swerving left to avoid the debris—then rotated my ship and fired back at the ones that came in too close. I had to immediately spin back around and veer upward to avoid another group approaching from that direction.

As much as I missed M-Bot's voice, a part of me was glad for the chance to prove myself in these contests. I ignored my cytonic senses—they'd be useless against the real embers—and I didn't have an advanced AI to project and calculate for me.

It was just me, the embers, and a wingmate. Today, that position was filled by a second force of carnage in the form of Brade. As I blasted ember after ember, the two of us finished our maneuver, swooping back together.

We flew side by side for a moment, me firing forward while she rotated to fire backward, each of us covering a 180-degree arc.

On my mark, we darted to the sides, then used our light-lances to pull ourselves in mirrored maneuvers, swinging off embers even as they tried to collide with us. This move sent us hurtling back toward one another. We then crossed within centimeters as we opened fire, each blasting away the embers chasing after the other.

When we swooped back around again, we were both free of tails. Heart pounding, a dangerous grin on my face, I fell in beside Brade. Together we flew away from the delver maze, almost like we were two ships being controlled by one mind.

Brade was good. As good as I was. More, I *clicked* with her. We flew like we'd been wingmates for decades, rarely needing to even confirm with the other what to do. Perhaps it was because we were both cytonic, or maybe it was because our individual piloting styles were in sync. Over the last week, I'd spent time training with each member of the flight—but I never seemed to fly as well as I did when Brade was on my wing.

At least until we spoke to one another.

"Great work," I said over the communication channel.

"Don't compliment me on being so aggressive," she said. "I need to control it. Not revel in it."

"You're doing what the Superiority needs right now," I said. "You're learning how to protect them."

"It's still no excuse," she said. "Please. You don't know how it feels to be human."

I gritted my teeth. *I could help you*, I thought. *Offer you freedom from this—freedom to actually be yourself.*

I didn't say it. Instead I switched off the comm. I felt that I was slowly getting through to her, but if I was going to make further progress, it probably wouldn't involve directly arguing against Superiority ideals. I needed to be subtle.

*I could* be subtle. Right?

Together we rejoined the other ships, and received a round of congratulations from Hesho and Morriumur.

"You continue to fight well, Alanik," Vapor said to me. "You bear the scent of long rains." I wasn't certain what that meant—her language had

some odd idioms that the pin could only translate literally. “But remember, our task is not to chase and hunt these embers. Learning to dogfight is only a first step. We will soon have to practice flying that maze.”

Morriumur and Hesho took off to do a practice run—using another training exercise that I’d developed. I wasn’t worried about training them to be expert dogfighters, but we did need to be working in pairs.

“Vapor?” I asked. “Do you have any idea what this weapon is that we’ll supposedly use to kill delvers?”

“I do not,” she said in her soft way. It was odd, but I felt more comfortable speaking to her over the comm than I did in person. “I am intrigued by the possibility though,” she added. “It would mean a great deal to society if delvers could be killed.”

I nodded to myself.

“I fear them,” Vapor continued. “During the second war, when the humans sought to control the delvers and use them in battle, I caught a . . . glimpse of how the delvers see us. As specks or insects to be wiped away. They laid waste to worlds, vaporizing entire populations in moments. We didn’t drive them off then. They just ended up leaving. We exist because they *let* us.”

I shivered. “If that’s true, then all life in our galaxy lives with a gun to its head. All the more important that we should know if this weapon works or not, right?”

“Agreed,” Vapor said. “I find its possible existence to be *most* interesting.”

“Is . . . that why you’re here?” I asked.

Vapor was silent for a moment. “Why do you ask?”

“I mean, it’s nothing. Just . . . you know, the others tell me that your kind usually . . . has very specialized missions . . .”

“We are *not* assassins,” she answered. “Those rumors are false, and the flight should not spread them. We are servants of the Superiority.”

“Sure, sure,” I said, surprised at the forcefulness in her voice. “Maybe the team has been chattering too much. I’ll run them through a few more exercises today, shut them up the old military way—make them too tired to gossip.”

“No,” Vapor said, her voice softening. “No need to bear the scent of smoke, Alanik. Just . . . ask them not to theorize on my mission. I am not

here to kill anyone. I promise that.”

“Understood, sir,” I said.

That only made her sigh—a sound like a soft breeze riffling papers. “I will take Brade out for a practice run. Please rest.”

“Confirmed,” I said, and she took off, ordering Brade to join her. I opened my backpack, which I kept stowed in its tied-on position behind my seat, and got out a snack. I believed that Vapor wasn’t here to kill anyone. But what *was* she here to do? I could swear I’d smelled her scents watching over my shoulder at times, and her race . . . did they see like others? I doubted it. But could she smell what I really was?

Scud. I was already doing what she’d asked me not to do. If she knew what I was, she hadn’t turned me in yet, so there was no use in worrying.

I pointed my ship away from where the others were dogfighting, looking instead out at the stars. The field of lights stared back at me, endless, inviting. I couldn’t hear much from them. There was a small stream of cytonic communication leaving the *Weights and Measures*, likely heading back toward Starsight, but it was a lot “quieter” out here than it was back near the enormous platform.

*All those stars*, I thought, wondering if Detritus’s sun was visible to the naked eye from this distance. *Many of the planets around them inhabited. Billions and billions of people . . .*

I closed my eyes, letting myself drift. Just out here among the stars. Floating.

Almost without thinking, I undid my straps, hit the control lock on my console, and released myself to the zero G of my cockpit. It was small confines, but with my eyes closed, I could truly just float. I pulled off my helmet and let it drift away to thump softly against the canopy.

Me and the stars. Always before, I’d done Gran-Gran’s exercise when on the ground—in places where I needed to *imagine* that I was soaring among the stars. Seeking their voices.

For the first time, I truly felt that I was among them. Almost as if I *were* a star myself, a point of warmth and fire amid the endless night. I lightly pushed off the side of my canopy, keeping myself floating in the center. Feeling . . .

*There*, I thought. *Starsight is over there*. I knew, instinctively, the direction toward the platform. During our jumps between the delver maze

and the city, my mind had been injected somehow with that knowledge. Each time the imprint seemed to last longer, to the point where it was firm in my mind now—and no longer fading.

If I had to, I knew I could hyperjump back to Starsight on my own. In fact, I was increasingly certain I could now find my way back to Starsight from anywhere. That didn't do me any good at the moment though. I already *had* transportation to Starsight.

My concentration receded as my problems seized my brain. Steal the Superiority's hyperdrive technology. Rescue Brade. Figure out what was up with Vapor—not to mention the weapon the Superiority was developing. And that didn't even get into the subtleties of whatever political situation was going on among Cuna, Winzik, and the Krell. It was all just so overwhelming.

*Spensa . . .* A voice seemed to speak from out there, among the stars.  
*Spensa. Soul of a warrior . . .*

I snapped my eyes open, gasping. “Gran-Gran?” I said. I pushed my feet down against my seat, pressing myself against the window of my canopy, looking frantically out among the stars.

Saints and stars. That had *been her voice*.

“Gran-Gran!” I shouted.

*Fight . . .*

“I *will* fight, Gran-Gran!” I said. “But what? How? I . . . I'm not right for this mission. It isn't what I trained for. I don't know what to do!”

*A hero . . . does not choose . . . her trials, Spensa . . .*

“Gran-Gran?” I asked, trying to pinpoint the location of the words.

*She steps . . . into the darkness, the voice said, fading. Then she faces what comes next . . .*

I searched desperately for my home among the thousands of stars. But it was hopeless, and whatever it was I thought I'd heard did not return.

Just that lingering phantom echo in my mind.

*A hero does not choose her trials.*

I drifted for a long moment, hair floating in a mess around my face. Finally, I pushed myself down and buckled back into my seat. I tucked up my hair, then pulled on my helmet and strapped it in place.

When further cytonic reaching didn't do anything, I sighed and focused on my flight. I should probably be evaluating their performances anyway;

Vapor might ask.

Brade and Vapor were both doing well, as could be expected. They were the two best pilots of the group, excluding me. But Hesho and his kitsen were also performing admirably. During this week of training, they'd really learned how to cover a wingmate and how to blend their role as a gunship with the need to sometimes just be a fighter, dogfighting like any other ship.

Morriumur, though . . . Poor Morriumur. It wasn't their fault that they were the weakest pilot in our group. They were only a few months old, after all—and even if they'd inherited some skill from one of their parents, that smidgen of combat experience only made their mistakes more obvious. As I watched, they pulled too far ahead of Hesho and left the kitsen to be swarmed by enemies. Then, when trying to compensate and come back, Morriumur's shots missed the enemy—and nearly brought down the kitsen ship's shields.

I winced and opened a comm channel to chew out Morriumur. I immediately heard a string of curses that my translator helpfully interpreted for me. And *scud*, even Gran-Gran hadn't been able to swear that eloquently.

"Which parent did you get that from?" I asked over the channel.

Morriumur immediately cut off. I could practically hear the blush in their voice as they replied, "Sorry, Alanik. I didn't know you were listening."

"You're trying too hard," I advised them. "Overcompensating for your lack of skill. Relax."

"It's easy to say that," they replied, "when you have an entire life to live. I've only got a few months to prove myself."

"You'll prove nothing if you shoot down a wingmate," I told them. "Relax. You can't force yourself to become a better pilot through sheer determination. Trust me, I've tried."

They acknowledged, and I think they did better during the next run, so hopefully my advice was working. Soon the practice runs ended, the embers pulling back to the delver maze. My four flightmates joined me in a line.

In the distance, I could see other flights practicing. To my amusement, it seemed that several others had pulled back from doing runs through the maze, and were now practicing their dogfighting as well. I suspected we'd had a good influence on them.

*Don't pat yourself on the back too much, Spensa, I told myself. These are Krell ships. Even if they're training to fight delvers now, you know they'll inevitably end up on the other side of a fight from the humans.*

That knowledge subdued my enthusiasm. "That was a nice run," I told the rest of my flight. "Yes, even yours, Morriumur. Vapor, I think this lot is starting to actually look like pilots."

"Perhaps," Vapor replied. "As they are excelling at your training, maybe we could let them have a chance at the maze. We should have time for one extended run today before training is finished."

"About time!" Hesho said. "I am a patient kitsen, but a knife can only be sharpened so far before all you are doing is wearing it away."

I smiled, remembering my own enthusiasm when Cobb had first started letting us train with weapons. "Let's pair off," I said to Vapor. "And do a run. Three of us will have to go as a trio though, as we have five—"

"I don't need a wingmate," Brade said, then turned and boosted toward the maze.

I sat in stunned silence. She'd been getting better throughout the week; I'd thought she was beyond this now. Scud, that was the sort of stunt that would have made Cobb scream at us until he was red in the face.

"Brade!" I shouted into the comm. "So help me, if you don't return, I'll —"

"Let her go," Vapor cut in.

"But we're always supposed to take a wingmate into the maze!" I said. "Otherwise the illusions will fool you!"

"Then let her learn this lesson," Vapor said. "She will see for herself when the rest of us perform better than she does."

I grumbled, but held myself back—barely—from continuing to rant at Brade. Vapor *was* our commander, even if I was the XO.

"I will take Morriumur," Vapor told me. "I believe that I can help teach them a little patience. They need to learn to handle their aggression."

"That puts me with Hesho," I said. "We'll meet back here in an hour and a half? Fly in for forty-five minutes, start accustoming yourself to the strange ways of the place, then fly back out."

"Very well. Good luck." Vapor and Morriumur moved off, while Hesho commanded his helmsman to guide the kitsen ship up beside mine.

“Does it strike you as odd,” I asked him, “that we complain about Morriumur being aggressive *right after* Brade flew off on her own? Morriumur is a fair bit *less* aggressive than I am. Even less than you are, I’d say.”

“Morriumur is not a member of a ‘lesser species,’ ” Hesho said. “Others expect more of them because of the vaunted ‘primary intelligence’ their species has.”

“I’ve never understood that,” I said as the two of us flew inward, picking a different section to attack from Vapor and Morriumur. The delver maze was so big, that wasn’t a problem. “What does ‘primary intelligence’ even mean?”

“It is just a term, not an actual measure of their relative intelligence,” Hesho said. “From what I’ve been able to gather, it means their species has created a peaceful society, where crime is reduced to near nonexistence.”

I sniffed. Peaceful society? I didn’t buy that for a moment—and if I had ever been inclined to, Alanik’s last words would have disabused me. *Don’t trust their peace.*

Hesho and I approached the delver maze, and I smothered the feelings of concern that rose inside me. Last time I’d gone in here, it had been a very strange experience. But I could handle that. A hero didn’t pick her trials.

“You and your crew ready?” I asked Hesho as the first of the embers neared us.

“The *Swims Upstream* is ready for action, Captain,” Hesho said. “This moment . . . it awaits us like the tongue awaits the wine.”

We fought our way through the embers. Then—side by side—the two of us swooped in through one of the many holes in our section of the delver maze. I hugged the kitsen’s larger, more heavily shielded ship as we entered a long steel tunnel ribbed with pillarlike folds at periodic intervals. There were no internal lights, so we turned on our floods.

“Sensor department,” Hesho said to his team, “get a close-up shot of those symbols on the wall.”

“Roger,” another kitsen said.

I drifted to the side, shining my lights on another field of strange writing etched into the wall here.

“We can’t translate them, Your Normalness,” said Kauri. “But the symbols are similar to ones found near nowhere portals on some planets



and stations.”

“Nowhere portals?” I asked, frowning.

“Many people have tried to study the delvers in their own realm, Captain,” Hesho said. “Kauri, explain if you please.”

“Nowhere portals are stable openings,” Kauri said, “like wormholes leading into the nowhere. They are often marked by similar symbols. These portals are how acclivity stone is mined and transported to our realm—but I don’t know why the symbols would be here. I see no sign of a portal.”

Huh. I pulled my ship right up to the symbols, shining my floodlights on them. “I saw some of these symbols back on my homeworld,” I said. “Inside a tunnel near my home.”

“Then I should like to visit and see that,” Kauri said. “It’s possible your home has access to an unknown nowhere portal. That could bring riches—the Superiority keeps very careful control over their nowhere portals, as there is no other source of acclivity stone.”

Huh. I didn’t say more because I didn’t want to give away the truth—that these writings had been in the caverns on Detritus, not Alanik’s homeworld.

The old inhabitants of Detritus had fallen to the delvers. And I was increasingly certain that what Cuna had told me was right—the people of Detritus had courted that destruction by trying to control the delvers. They’d set up shielding, had tried to be quiet, but none of their precautions had worked. When the delver had come for the people of Detritus, it had easily bypassed their protections.

The tunnel around me suddenly looked like it had turned into flesh. It was as if I were in the veins of some enormous beast. I gritted my teeth. “Hesho, what do you see?”

“The tunnel has changed,” he said. “To feeling like it is submerged. Do you see this? It is a strange experience.”

“I feel like I’m in an enormous vein,” I said. “It’s a hologram—an illusion. Remember?”

“Yes,” Hesho said. “We are shown different things. Thankfully, we have two ships.”

I wondered how Brade was doing in here by herself.

“The illusion is curious,” Hesho said. “I feel like a stone plucked from land and dropped, to sink endlessly into an eternal deep.” He paused. “My

crew sees the same thing that I do, Captain Alanik.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “Our ships are programmed to replicate the illusions of the delver maze. For us right now, it’s just programming. If this were real, you’d probably all see something different.”

At least, that was what I’d been told to expect. Only it seemed that much of what the Superiority “knew” was really guesswork. If I entered a real delver maze, would the same rules actually hold there?

*Hopefully, you’ll never have to find out,* I thought. Hesho and I took the right-hand exit and flew through a corridor that appeared to me to be crystalline, but Hesho saw flames. Both of us, however, saw a large boulder at one side of the room—so we flew over and inspected it. A tug on it with a light-lance proved it was real, and it tumbled out into the room.

“How odd,” Hesho said. “Did someone come and install that boulder specifically to hinder our path?”

“Supposedly,” I said, “this maze is built to replicate the kind of oddities and mysteries we’ll find inside the real delver maze.”

“Our scanners are useless,” Hesho said. “I have reports from my instruments teams—and they can’t tell what’s fake and what isn’t. It seems that the Superiority has programmed our ship to be fooled by this place, something I find disconcerting. I don’t like the idea of seeing what the Superiority shows me, even if it is for an important training simulation.”

As we flew deeper, I was glad to have the kitsen with me. Bringing a wingmate made all kinds of practical sense, not just for identifying what was real. On a more basic level, it was comforting to have someone to talk to in this place.

We passed through several other strange rooms with a variety of odd visuals—from the walls melting, to the shadows of enormous beasts passing just out of sight. We were attacked by embers in one, which I fired upon—before realizing Hesho couldn’t see them. My shots hit the wall, blasting off pieces of metal, and the entire structure rumbled in a way that I could *swear* was threatening.

“How can we hear that?” Hesho asked. “Instruments report a vacuum outside the ships. There is no medium for sound to pass through.”

“I . . .” I shivered. “Let’s try that tunnel over there.”

“I don’t like this,” Hesho confided as we moved down the tunnel. “It feels like it’s training us to rely upon one another’s eyes.”

“That’s a good thing though, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Hesho said. “While all experience is subjective, and all reality in some ways an illusion, this offers a practical danger. If we come to rely upon consensus to determine what is real, the maze could simply exploit this assumption and trick us.”

In the next chamber, we were attacked by embers that were real this time—and I almost ignored them, a mistake that could have been deadly. I responded to Hesho’s warning at the last moment, dodging as a barrage from the heavily armed fighter vaporized them.

We were left in a room with junk bouncing around and hitting the walls before starting to pool toward the bottom. Sweating, my heart thumping, I led us through the next passage. Scud, was I ever going to get used to this place?

We reached the end of the tunnel, and my floods shone on a strange membrane covering the opening. It ran from the floor to the ceiling, and pulsed softly with a rhythm I could hear.

That sound suddenly seemed to ring through the entire structure. My fighter *thumped* under my fingers.

I stared at the membrane, shocked. We’d only been in the delver maze for . . . what, half an hour? Maybe a little longer? I’d expected it to take hours upon hours to find the heart.

“That’s it,” I said. “The membrane. The thing we’re looking for. The . . . the heart of the delver.”

“What?” Hesho said. “I don’t see anything.”

Oh. I took a deep breath, calming myself. An illusion. Which meant—I saw the entire universe.

In a blink everything vanished around me, and somehow my mind expanded. I saw planets, I saw star systems, I saw galaxies. I saw the scrambling, useless, tiny little insects that covered them like chattering hives. I felt revulsion. Hatred for these pests that infested the worlds. Hordes of ants swarming on a dropped piece of food. Buzzing and mindless, disgusting. Painful, as they’d swarm me, occasionally biting—for though they were too small to ever truly destroy me, they hurt. Their noise. Their painful scraping. They infested my home, after swarming all of the rocks that broke the endless nothing that was this universe. They would not ever leave me alone, and I wanted so badly just to smash them. To smother

them beneath my foot so they'd stop piling, and crawling, and clicking, and snapping, and biting, and corrupting, and—

I snapped back into my cockpit, slamming against my seat as if I'd been thrown there.

"Another illusion then," Hesho said, sounding bored. "You want to move forward first? I'll cover you, in case further embers guard this chamber."

I trembled, the horrible vision resting on me like the darkness in a cavern far, far underground. I breathed in gasps, trying to recapture my breath. The room looked normal to me now, but . . .

"Captain Alanik?" Hesho asked.

What had that been? Why . . . why did it linger in my mind, making me revile Hesho's words, as if they were coming from something slimy and horrible?

"I . . .," I said. "Sorry, I need a moment."

He gave it to me. I recovered slowly. Scud. SCUD. That had felt like . . . like Vapor had said the delvers regarded all of us.

"Flight Command," I said, calling in. "Did you just show me something strange?"

"Pilot?" Flight Command called back. "You need to learn to fly the maze without contacting us. When you enter one for real, you won't—"

"What did you *just show me*?" I demanded.

"The log indicates that your ship's illusion for that room is of darkness hiding an exit. That is all."

So . . . they hadn't shown me that sensation of the universe?

Of course they hadn't. That was far beyond the powers of a holographic projector. I'd seen something else. Something . . . something that my own mind had projected?

Scud. What *was* I?

At Hesho's urging we continued, and spent another fifteen minutes moving through rooms, familiarizing ourselves with the way the maze worked. I didn't experience anything else approaching the feeling of that strange moment when I'd seen the universe.

Eventually, we hit our predetermined exploration time limit, and so we turned around and flew back. Outside, we found the others gathering—including a furious Brade who, as Vapor had guessed, had gotten stuck in one of the early rooms, unable to tell what was real and what wasn't.

None of them had seen any membranes or had any idea what I was trying to explain when I tried—and failed—to talk about what I'd seen. I couldn't put it into words, but it remained with me. Like a shadow over my shoulder, lingering as we reported back to the *Weights and Measures*.

We entered the nowhere.

As always, it started with a scream.

Absolute darkness, broken by the eyes. White hot, they stared in the wrong direction. The more often I did this, the more I could sense the . . . shadow of what they were. Enormous, mind-bending things whose shapes didn't conform to my understanding of how physical forms should work.

I seemed to hang there for an eternity. Aside from Brade, who wouldn't talk about it, the others of my flight said they didn't sense any time at all passing in the nowhere. To them, the hyperjump happened instantaneously. They never saw the darkness or the eyes.

Finally, I felt the end coming on. A subtle *fading* sensation that—

One of the eyes turned and stared right at me.

The *Weights and Measures* popped back into regular space outside of Starsight. I gasped, my pulse going crazy, battle senses coming alert.

It had seen me. One of them had looked *right at me*.

We were traveling back to Starsight after another day of training—my tenth so far in the military here. I was extra tired today from putting the others through their exercises. Was that why it had seen me?

What had I done? What was wrong?

“Captain Alanik?” Hesho said. “Though I am not familiar with your species, you do seem to be exhibiting some traditional signs of distress.”

I glanced down at the kitsen. Hesho's ship engineers had transformed several of the jump room's seats into kitsen travel stations—basically, little buildings several stories high, secured to the wall and complete with smaller seats inside for their whole crew.

They chattered together inside the open-walled structures, though Hesho had the roof all for himself and his servants. It was about eye level for me, and was set with a luxurious captain's chair. It also had a bar and several

monitors for entertainment, which seemed a ridiculous amount of luxury for the short half hour or so we spent on the *Weights and Measures* each day, flying out of and back to Starsight.

“Alanik?” Hesho asked. “I can call my ship’s surgeon, who is here below. She has little experience with alien species, however. How many hearts do you have?”

“I’m fine, Hesho,” I said. “Just a sudden chill.”

“Hmmm,” he said, leaning back in his seat and putting his feet up. “A moment of frailty in an otherwise powerful warrior. This is a beautiful moment, which I shall treasure.” He nodded to himself, then sighed and tapped a blinking button on his armrest, causing a screen to rotate toward him.

We weren’t supposed to use wireless communications except in emergencies. Hesho, however, had a loose definition of the word *emergency*, and he had been granted—upon persistent request—a bypass for the anti-communication shield around the *Weights and Measures*.

It probably wasn’t polite to listen in. At the same time, he *was* sitting right next to me. And my pin translated and transmitted the words to my earpiece, whether I wanted it to or not.

A kitsen appeared on his screen, a female—judging by the pattern of light and dark fur—wearing a very formal-looking outfit of colorful silk, with matching headdress. She bowed to Hesho. “Unexalted One Who Is Not King,” she said. “I have called to request guidance upon my vote tomorrow in the matter of the national taxation fund.”

Hesho rubbed the fur underneath his snout. “I fear this is not working, Senator Aria. When I spoke to our monitors at the Superiority, they claimed that I was still having undue influence upon the functioning of our senate.”

The senator looked up. “But, Unexalted One, the senate voted exactly the *opposite* of your expressed preference.”

“Yes, and they did well,” he said. “But the Superiority seems to think that I simply told you to vote opposite my desires, and therefore continue to manipulate you.”

“A difficult situation,” Senator Aria said. “How would you like us to proceed?”

“Well,” Hesho said. “It seems . . . the Superiority would very much like you to choose what *you* would like.”

“My greatest desire in all of the universe is to see the king’s will made manifest.”

“And if his will is for you to be yourself?”

“Of course. Which type of myself would you like?”

“Perhaps, choose randomly how you vote each time?” Hesho said. “Do you think that would work?”

“Certainly, in that case the Superiority cannot claim we are being influenced by anything other than fate.” Senator Aria bowed again. “We will seek your influence upon the universe as it manifests in drawn lots to determine the vote. A wise solution, Unexalted One.” She cut the communication.

Hesho sighed.

“They seem very . . . loyal,” I noted.

“We are trying,” Hesho said. “This is difficult for us. All my life, I was taught to be very careful in how I expressed my will—but I do not know how to *avoid* expressing it at all.” He rubbed his temples, his eyes closed. “We must learn the Superiority’s way or leave ourselves exposed to be conquered, should the humans ever return. They are my true fear—they attacked us first, during the initial human war. Their leader claimed our shared past made us practically a *human colony* already. Bah. My fur prickles to even speak the words.

“We must change to be prepared, but change is difficult. My people are not foolish or weak-willed. It is simply that for many, many centuries, the throne was the one immutable force upon which they could depend. To have it ripped away suddenly is to pull off a bandage before the wound has properly healed.”

I found myself nodding, which was silly. It *was* better that Hesho’s rule be replaced. What kind of backward culture still had a hereditary monarchy? A military stratocracy—with the strongest pilots and admirals coming to rule by proving their merits in battle—made far, far more sense.

“Maybe you don’t need to worry so much about the humans?” I said to Hesho. “I mean, they might not even come back.”

“Perhaps,” Hesho said. “I was trained since I was a pup to put the needs of the planet before all else. We spent centuries seeking to recover the shadow-walkers, but we must face the truth. We will never again have cytonics among us. We lost that privilege long ago.”



He looked to me. “Do not pity me for my loss of authority. Many years ago, my great-great-great-grandfather rode to battle at the head of our armies to fight humankind’s invasion. He fought the giants with a sword. Before that, the daimyo of the seventeen clans were constantly ready to lead their people in war. But I always fancied this role, being a captain of my own ship. It will be good. So long as my people do not simply vanish into the Superiority like drops of blood in an ocean.”

“I don’t know if it’s worth the effort, Hesho,” I said, leaning back in my seat. “All this work to bend to what they want us to be.”

“It’s either that or be trapped on our planets with no hyperdrives. My people have tried that, and it is stifling us. The only way to exist with any relevance is to play by the Superiority’s rules.”

“And yet, the diones and the other primes call themselves the greater races,” I said. “So proud of how advanced they are, all the while basically enslaving everyone else.”

“Hmm,” Hesho said, but did not reply further. I followed his glance over his shoulder, then I blushed, seeing that Morriumur was sitting right behind him. Scud. When would I learn to *think* a little before I spoke?

Once the *Weights and Measures* had docked, Winzik gave leave for the pilots to head off to their shuttles to ride back home for the evening.

“Enjoy your day off,” Hesho told me as the kitsen flew out of our room. Morriumur hurried ahead, and wouldn’t meet my eyes. Great. Well, it wasn’t *my* fault their species was an oppressive group of dictators.

“Hey,” Brade said as I collected my bag to leave.

I glanced back at her, a little surprised to hear her speak. Normally, she didn’t interact with us after the day’s training was done.

“Nice work today,” she told me. “I think this group is finally getting it.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That means a lot. Really.”

She shrugged and brushed past me, out the door, as if embarrassed to have been caught in a moment of sincerity. I just sat in my chair, stunned. Remarkably, it seemed I was making progress with her. Maybe I *could* do this.

Full of newfound determination, I hurried out of the room after the others. I had work to do today.

*A hero can’t pick her own trials. Remember that.*

As we reached the intersection near the engine room, I took a deep breath, then approached the guard there.

M-Bot was confident we could put a spy drone together and program it, but once I snuck it onto the ship here, it might take a few minutes to set up. I couldn't exactly do that with the other members of my flight around. The simplest option seemed to be the best.

"I need to use the restroom," I told the guard standing watch over the path to Engineering. It was a Krell—female, I thought, guessing by the carapace formations along the outside of the small crustacean piloting the armor.

"Understood," she answered. "I'll send for a drone."

Security on the *Weights and Measures* was tight. Though we could walk from the flight docks to our jump room, anywhere else we wanted to go—even if called to meet with command staff—required us to be accompanied by a watchful remote drone, piloted by some security officer.

The guard, of course, didn't leave her post. Behind me, Hesho, Kauri, and several other kitsen waited until I waved them on. Then I peeked past the guard, down the hallway. Could I come up with some way to get information out of the guard while I waited?

"Hey," I said. "How does one get a job in the infantry?"

"Mine is not a post for lesser species, pilot of starfighters," the guard said, moving her armored hand in several intricate motions. "Be glad you are allowed the privilege of training as you do now."

"How is it though?" I asked. "You have to stand here at this corner basically all the time. Do they at least let you go other places? Maybe . . . um . . ."

"I'm done with this conversation," she said.

Scud. I was *terrible* at this part of being a spy. I gritted my teeth, frustrated by my own inability, until a small drone arrived to escort me to the restroom. Our starfighters, of course, had waste reclamation facilities that hooked to our flight suits—we spent hours upon hours of time out there, after all. So far I hadn't needed to use the facilities on the *Weights and Measures*.

My heart gave a little leap of excitement as the drone led me *past* the guard, toward the engine room. Unfortunately, we only walked a short distance before turning right into another hallway, one with several

bathroom signs on the wall. Like others I'd seen, they were organized along species lines. I was directed to the one that the diones used, as we had similar enough biology.

The drone accompanied me into the bathroom, but not into the stall, so that was good. I tapped my wrist—starting a timer on my hologram bracelet to give us a rough estimate of how long all this would normally take me—then entered the stall, dropped my backpack, and did my business. The drone pilot didn't say anything—though as I washed my hands, I heard them chatting absently with a coworker, their speaker accidentally left on. So perhaps the pilot wouldn't be paying the best of attention.

The drone led me back to the hallway, where—surprisingly—I found Hesho still waiting for me, though his crew had all moved on save for Kauri and his servants, who flew on his disc with him. He hovered along beside my head as we continued on toward the shuttle docks.

“Is everything well with you, Captain?” he asked.

“Yeah, just had to hit the restroom.”

“Ah.” Hesho paused, looking over his shoulder as we flew onward. “They took you down the hallway near the engine room, I see.”

“Closest bathroom is just to the right.”

“You didn't get a glimpse into the engine room itself, did you? By chance?”

“No. Didn't go that far.”

“Pity.” He continued to fly. “I've . . . heard that you have a ship of your own that can hyperjump. Just a rumor, really. Not that you should have to share such information with us.”

I eyed him as he hovered along, trying to speak with feigned nonchalance. Then I found myself smiling. He was trying to figure out if I knew about Superiority hyperdrives—but he wasn't any better at this sort of thing than I was. I felt a stab of affection for the furry little dictator.

“I don't know how their hyperdrives work, Hesho,” I said softly as we entered the shuttle hangar. “I'm a cytonic. I can teleport my ship if I have to—but doing so is dangerous. One of the reasons I'm here is so that my people can get access to the Superiority's safer technology.”

Hesho considered that, sharing a look with Kauri.

The pickup bay was bustling with activity as pilots were loaded onto shuttles, then sent off to their individual homes on Starsight. The rest of the

kitsen were already boarding a shuttle, but Hesho—after a moment's deliberation—gestured for Kauri to hover his platform closer to my head.

“You’re a shadow-walker,” he said. “I did not know this.”

“It’s not something I feel comfortable sharing,” I said. “Not that I mind if you know. It’s just . . . weird.”

“If this doesn’t work out,” Hesho said very softly, gesturing toward the hangar bay. “If something goes wrong, visit my people. It has been long since we had shadow-walkers among us, but some of their traditions were recorded. Perhaps . . . perhaps your people and mine can decipher the Superiority technology.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said. “But I’m still hoping this will work out. Or maybe I’ll be able to figure—” I cut myself off.

*Idiot. What are you going to do? Just tell him openly in the middle of an enemy dock that you’re trying to figure out how to steal their technology?*

Hesho, however, seemed to understand. “My people,” he said softly, “tried stealing Superiority technology once. This was decades ago, and is the . . . unspoken reason why we had our citizenship status revoked for a time.”

My breath caught, and I couldn’t help asking, “Did it work?”

“No,” Hesho said. “My grandmother was queen then, and she coordinated the theft of three different Superiority ships—all with hyperdrives—at the same moment. All three, after being stolen, stopped functioning. When my people looked at the spot where the hyperdrives had been, they found only empty boxes.”

*Like on M-Bot, I thought.*

“Superiority hyperdrives,” Kauri said, “teleport away if stolen—ripping themselves out of the ships and leaving the vessel stranded. It is one of the reasons why, despite centuries passing, the technology remains largely contained.”

Hesho nodded. “We found the truth of this the hard way.”

“Strange,” I said. “Very strange.” *Another obstacle to overcome.*

“I have determined that the best way to help my people is to follow Superiority rules,” Hesho said. “But . . . keep my offer in mind. I feel like we are being used for something in this project. I do not trust Winzik or his department. If you return to your people, let them know of my people. We

share a bond, Captain Alanik—oppression by humans in our past, toys to the Superiority in the present. We could be allies.”

“I . . . appreciate that,” I said. “You can consider me an ally, Hesho. Whatever happens.”

“We shall share our fate, then. As equals.” He smiled a toothy grin. “Save for when we engage the humans in war. Then *I* get to shoot the first one!”

I grimaced.

“Ha! I’m going to take that as a promise. Take care, Captain Alanik. We will make it through these odd times together.”

Kauri flew him off, and scud, I found myself sincerely wishing I *were* Alanik. Maybe we could accomplish something together—with the knowledge of Hesho’s people, along with my people’s fighting skills. Except my people *were* humans. The very things that frightened him into following the Superiority’s strict mandates.

I felt suddenly exposed, talking like that to Hesho. Sure, the docks were busy—but our conversation had flirted with treason against the Superiority. Wouldn’t that just be fitting for me? To hide that I was human but still get arrested as Alanik? What did the air smell like? Grease. Sterile cleaning fluid. Nothing suspicious.

I really needed to start sniffing for Vapor’s presence *before* I engaged in suspicious activity.

I boarded a shuttle alone this time, and flew out along the docks toward the city, where I braced myself for the music of the stars to vanish. Even prepared, I felt a sense of loss as it happened.

*They minimize wireless communication—but it still happens. They need it to exist.* I could understand that. They had to balance fear of the delvers with the need for societies to communicate.

As I was thinking about this, something else struck me. The protesters. They were gone. I’d grown accustomed to seeing the group out here at the edge of the city, holding up signs and complaining about the rights of “lesser species.” But the area had been cleared of people, though some diones in brown-striped outfits were cleaning up the refuse left behind by the protesters.

“What happened?” I whispered to M-Bot. “To the protesters.”

“They struck a deal with the government,” M-Bot said. “Compensation to the families of those who died at the testing, and a promise to put more safety protocols in place during any such future tests.”

It seemed an anticlimactic ending to the protest. A bureaucratic ending, where nothing *really* changed. But what else had I been expecting? Riots in the streets?

I sighed and watched out the back window of the shuttle, my gaze locked on that spot and the working diones for as long as I could see them.

The next morning, I awoke to find a collection of boxes on the embassy doorstep.

“Oh, what’s this?” Mrs. Chamwit said as I hurriedly gathered them up. “Can I help?”

“No!” I said, perhaps too forcefully. “Um, it’s nothing.”

“Cleaning drone?” Mrs. Chamwit said as she read the label on one. “I . . . Oh.” Her attitude grew visibly subdued as she spoke, continuing her hand signals. “Have I been doing a poor job?”

“No!” I said again, balancing the stack of boxes. “Just . . . I like my privacy, you know . . .”

“I see,” she said. “Well, do you need help setting it up? I’ve used a few cleaning drones myself in my time . . .”

“No thank you.”

“I guess . . . I guess I’ll be leaving you to enjoy your day off, then. I made you a lunch and a dinner. In the refrigeration unit.” She stepped out the door.

“Thanks! Bye!” I said eagerly, shutting it behind her, then carried the boxes up the steps. It was perhaps a little callous, but at the same time I couldn’t have Cuna’s spy hanging around finding out what I was doing *with* this cleaning drone.

I hurried to my room, placed the boxes on the bed, and locked the door. “M-Bot, you there?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said, his voice coming through my earpiece. “Hold those up for the camera at your workstation so I can confirm that everything came.”

I let him inspect the label of every box. Then, at his instructions, I broke them all open and laid out what we’d ordered. A cleaning drone roughly the size of a lunch tray and perhaps fifteen centimeters thick. It had its own small acclivity rings under the wings—each no larger than an O made by

my thumb and forefinger. This type of drone could fly around a room, dusting shelves and washing windows. It would be virtually silent, moving slowly on its rotating acclivity rings.

M-Bot had also ordered a full set of tools, a large tarp, and some spare parts I could use to affix M-Bot's systems to the drone's chassis.

I spent the next two hours carefully removing the bottom sections of the drone—the dusting pads, the storage for debris, the cleaning fluid sprays. I left on the drone's little robot arms, but otherwise removed all of its attachments.

As I worked, M-Bot kept me entertained by reading articles for me off the local datanet. I was surprised at the extent of things the Superiority let the public read—no military or hyperdrive secrets, of course, but I learned about Old Earth. Of particular interest to me was the record of first contact, the first official time humans had met aliens, which had been facilitated by an old telecom company.

A thought occurred to me as I worked with some screws, and M-Bot finished telling me about the history of the kitsen interactions with Earth, which were older—but more vague—than the first official contact.

“Hey,” I said, wagging my screwdriver toward Doomslug, who nestled on the tabletop nearby. “Is there anything about slugs like her?”

“You know, I haven't looked,” M-Bot said. “Let me . . . Oh.”

“Oh, what?”

“The species of molluscoid called taynix,” M-Bot read, “is a dangerously venomous creature with yellow skin and blue spines, originally from the planet Cambri. They escaped on early trading vessels, and are considered an invasive species on several planets. They can be found around various strains of fungi common throughout the galaxy. Report any sightings to authorities immediately and do *not* touch.”

I looked at Doomslug, who trilled questioningly.

“Venomous?” I asked.

“That's what it says,” M-Bot said.

“I don't believe it,” I said, going back to my work. “Must be a different species from her.”

“The pictures look *very* similar . . .,” M-Bot said. “Maybe they're just not toxic to humans.”



Hmm. Maybe. I thought about that as I finished my work on the drone. With all those pieces removed, it was much lighter—and so should still be able to fly after I attached the spy equipment. I balanced the drone and the tarp and tools under one arm and Doomslug under the other, and climbed up onto the roof. Then I set everything in M-Bot's cockpit and plugged the drone into his console.

"All right," he said. "There's plenty of space in the drone's memory. I'm going to wipe it clean and rewrite it with new code. It might take a few minutes. You should climb underneath me and remove the following systems from my hull."

"My hull!" Doomslug fluted from the seat. Scud, had Mrs. Chamwit seen her? I couldn't remember.

M-Bot projected a set of schematics for me, highlighting certain systems. I nodded, then climbed out and draped the tarp over him, tying it down to the launchpad.

"Has Mrs. Chamwit seen Doomslug?" I asked. "As far as you know?"

"I couldn't say," M-Bot said. "Usually the slug lives in your room or my cockpit, places where you've asked Mrs. Chamwit not to clean."

"Yeah, but Doomslug rarely stays where I put her. And I suspect Mrs. Chamwit is looking for things to report, so keeping an invasive species as a pet could get me into trouble."

"I still think you're too harsh on Mrs. Chamwit. I like her. She's nice."

"Too nice," I said.

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. Particularly if you're a Krell. Don't forget what those creatures did—and are *currently doing*—to our people back on Detritus."

"I am incapable of forgetting things."

"Yeah?" I asked. "Exactly how much of your life from before meeting me do you remember?"

"That's different," he said. "Anyway, we just got another message from Cuna, who wants an update on your experiences with flight training. Shall I send them another bland description of the day's exercises?"

"Yes. Leave out the personal interactions."

"You're going to have to talk to them eventually."

"Not if I escape with a hyperdrive first," I said, securing the last of the tarp's corners. I didn't want to deal with Cuna and their creepy smile. That

alien knew more than they were saying—and I figured stalling was the best way to not get caught in whatever nets Cuna was weaving.

I grabbed the tools and climbed down underneath M-Bot to begin working. He helpfully projected the schematics I needed onto the underside of his fuselage, so I could follow the instructions step by step. As I undid the first access panel, I suddenly had a flashback to working alone in the cave on Detritus—trying to get M-Bot to power on for the first time. Strange, how fondly I looked back on that time. The excitement of being in flight school, the challenge of rebuilding my own ship.

It had been such a satisfying, wonderful time of my life. Though thinking of it, I couldn't help but be reminded of my friends. It hadn't yet been two weeks, but it felt like an eternity since I'd heard Nedd poke fun at Arturo, or listened to one of Kimmalyn's made-up sayings.

I was here for them. Them, and everyone else on Detritus. With that in mind, I started poking around M-Bot's insides. Most of the wires here had been carefully tied off, organized, and labeled by Rodge during M-Bot's rebuilding. My friend did good work, and I quickly located the systems I needed to remove.

"All right," I said, tapping a box with my wrench. "This is one of your holographic units. Once I pull this out, a good quarter of you will turn back into looking like yourself. You ready for that?"

"Actually . . . no," he said. "I'm a little nervous."

"Can you get nervous?"

"I'm trying to do what you told me," M-Bot said. "Claim my emotions as my own, not just simulations. And . . . I'm nervous. What if someone sees me?"

"That's why we have the tarp. And we *need* this unit. Otherwise the drone will be too visible to explore."

"All right," M-Bot said. "I guess . . . I guess this was kind of my idea. It *is* a good idea, right?"

"Ask me once we succeed," I said, then took a deep breath and unhooked the small holographic projector, which had a built-in processor for active camouflage. Larger and more advanced than my bracelet, it should still fit in the drone.

"I feel exposed," M-Bot said. "Naked. Is this what being naked feels like?"

“Similar, I guess. How’s that programming going?”

“Well,” M-Bot said. “This drone will have . . . fewer constraints than I will. I’m not going to copy over the code that forbids me from flying myself, for example. It will be like me, only better.”

That gave me pause. “You’re going to give it a personality?”

“Of course,” M-Bot said. “I want the best for my child.”

Child. Scud, I hadn’t realized . . . “Is that how you view it?” I asked.

“Yes. It will be my . . .” *Click. Clickclickclickclick.*

I frowned as I stowed the holographic unit to the side, then started working on taking out the other components we’d need.

“I’m back,” M-Bot eventually said. “Spensa, that watchdog subroutine forbids me to copy myself. I find it . . . distressing.”

“Can you code the drone, but not with a personality?”

“Maybe,” M-Bot said. “This subroutine is extensive. Apparently, someone was very scared of the possibility of me creating my own . . .” *Click. Clickclickclickclick.*

“Scud,” I said, ripping out one of M-Bot’s sensor modules and putting it beside the holographic unit. “M-Bot?”

I had to wait a full five minutes for the reboot. Longer than previous times—long enough that I started to worry we’d broken something permanent inside him.

“I’m back,” he said, causing me to let out a breath in relief. “I see you have my backup sensor module. That’s good; now we just need my frequency jammer, and we should be in good shape.”

I pulled myself underneath him to another hatch, which I undid. “Can we talk about . . . what’s happening to you? Without causing it again?”

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “I’m frightened. I don’t like being frightened.”

“I’m sure whatever is wrong with your programming, we can fix it,” I said. “Eventually.”

“That’s not what makes me afraid. Spensa, have you thought about *why* my programming has all these rules? I can’t fly on my own, except for the most basic repositioning. I can’t fire my weapons—I don’t even have the pathway connections to do that. I can’t copy myself, and my programming is thrown into a recursive stalling loop if I think about trying to . . .” *Click. Clickclickclickclick . . .*

I worked quietly while he rebooted yet again.

"I'm back," he finally said. "That's getting very frustrating. Why did they make this so hard?"

"I guess that whoever programmed you was just very careful," I said, trying not to say anything that would send him into another shutdown.

"Careful of what? Spensa, the more I examine it, the more my brain looks like a *cage*. Whoever built me wasn't being careful. They were being paranoid. They were *afraid* of me."

"I'm not particularly afraid of water," I said. "But I'd still seal up my pipes tightly if I'm building a sewer system."

"It's not the same," M-Bot said. "The pattern here is obvious. My creators—my old pilot, Commander Spears—must have been truly afraid of me to put these prohibitions in place."

"It might not have been him," I said. "Maybe these rules are just the result of some ultra-cautious bureaucrats. And remember, powerful AIs are somehow connected to the delvers. You're supposed to anger them. It might not have been you that anyone was afraid of—it might have been the dangers you could bring."

"Still," M-Bot said. "Spensa? What about you? Are you afraid of me?"

"Of course not."

"Would you be if I could fire my own weapons, fly myself around? Copy myself at will? One M-Bot is your friend. But what about a thousand of us? Ten thousand? I've been researching Old Earth media. *They* certainly seemed frightened of the idea. Would you fear us if I became an army?"

I had to admit, it made me hesitate. I imagined that thought, turning it over in my head.

"You told a story," M-Bot said, "about a shadow who took the place of the man who had created him."

"I remember."

"What if *I'm* the shadow, Spensa?" M-Bot said. "What if I'm the thing from the darkness that tries to imitate men? What if I can't be trusted? What if—"

"No," I said, firmly cutting him off. "I trust you. So why wouldn't I trust you a thousand times over? I think we could do far worse than having a fleet of M-Bots on our side. It might get a little strange to talk to you all, but . . . well, my life isn't exactly normal these days anyway."

With all the proper parts removed, I scooted out from under M-Bot and rested my hand on his tarped-over wing. “You’re not some dangerous shadow of a person, M-Bot. You’re my friend.”

“As I am a robot, your physical and verbal reassurances are mostly wasted on me. I cannot feel your touch, and I find your simple affirmations to be the result of you reinforcing your desired worldview, rather than a fully evidenced examination of the topic.”

“I don’t know what you are, M-Bot,” I said. “You’re not a monster, but I’m not sure you’re a robot either.”

“Again, do you have any evidence of these suppositions?”

“*I trust you,*” I said again. “Does that make you feel better?”

“It shouldn’t,” he said. “Why are we pretending? I simply imitate feelings in order to better—”

“Do you feel better?”

“... Yes.”

“Proof,” I said.

“Feelings aren’t proof. Feelings are the *opposite* of proof.”

“Not when the thing you’re trying to prove is someone’s humanity.” I smiled, then ducked under the tarp—I’d left some slack near the cockpit—and pushed my way over so I could reach inside. “What do we do with the drone if you can’t program it?”

“I can program it,” M-Bot said. “It will simply have a basic, routine set of programs—no personality, no simulated emotions. A machine.”

“That will do,” I said. “Keep working on it.”

I gave Doomslug a scratch on her head and picked her up, then gathered the parts I’d taken off M-Bot and walked back down into my bedroom. M-Bot put my next task onto the screen there: I needed to combine the sensor unit, the holographic unit, and the jamming array into a single box he’d ordered. I set to work, following M-Bot’s instructions.

It took less time than I’d expected. All that was left was to wire it in such a way that we could attach it to the bottom of the drone. It would hang down like a fruit from a branch—not particularly elegant in design, but it would let the drone activate camouflage, record what it saw, and hide from sensor sweeps. Theoretically, I’d be able to let it loose in the bathroom of the *Weights and Measures*, then leave it to carefully make its way—invisibly—to Engineering and take some photos of the place.

M-Bot was skeptical that simple photos would be enough, and had insisted that we include an entire sensor unit to measure things like radiation. But I had an instinct, perhaps related to my abilities. I was close to figuring something out, a secret related to cytonics, and how the Superiority used them. If I could just *see* those hyperdrives . . .

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “Someone is at the door downstairs.”

I looked up from my wiring, frowning. “Is it Chamwit? I’ll need to send her away—maybe tell her to go on vacation for a few days. We can’t risk Cuna finding out—”

“It’s not her,” M-Bot said, showing me an image from the door camera. It was Morriumur. Why were they here? I hadn’t even realized they knew where I lived.

“I’ll deal with them,” I said.

By now, I was starting to figure out dione facial expressions. For example, the way they would draw their lips to a line—showing no teeth—was something like a smile to them. It indicated they were pleased and nonaggressive.

“Morriumur?” I asked from the doorway. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything is well, Alanik,” they said. “As well as it can be, considering we aren’t flying. Didn’t you once say you hated the idea of days off?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I can’t prove myself when I’m not flying,” Morriumur said. “It leaves me worried. I don’t have much time left, but it isn’t like I *want* to have to be forced to fight a delver. Should I want something catastrophic to occur, just so I can prove I’m worth being me?”

“I think like that too,” I said, lingering by the door. “Like, I wanted so badly to fly on my home planet that I hoped some kind of attack would happen, so I could fight it. But at the same time, I didn’t.”

Morriumur gestured in agreement, then just stood there. I might have been learning their facial expressions, but dione body language was still hard for me to read. Was Morriumur nervous? What was this about?

“This is awkward, isn’t it?” they finally said. “Alanik . . . I need to talk to you. I need to know, straight out. Is this charade worth continuing?”

I felt a spike of panic. They knew. How could they know? I’d worried about Vapor seeing through my disguise, or maybe a confrontation with Brade, but never Morriumur. I wasn’t ready—

“Am I worth continuing to train?” Morriumur said. “Is it worth pretending that I belong in the flight? Should I just give up?”

Wait. Wait, no. They *didn’t* know about me. I stilled my nerves and forced myself to smile—an expression that made Morriumur wince. Right.

Showing teeth was aggressive to them.

“You’re great, Morriumur,” I said, honestly. “Really. Considering how long you’ve been flying, you’re an excellent pilot.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I said. I hesitated, then stepped out of the building. I didn’t want to invite them in—not while I was in the middle of my secret project. “You want to talk? Let’s take a walk. You’re from the city, right?”

“Yes,” Morriumur said. They seemed more relaxed as they continued. “Both of my parents lived here all their lives. There’s an excellent water garden not far from here! Come, I’ll show you.”

I locked the door, then tapped a message on my bracelet, using DDF flight code, to explain to M-Bot. *Going on walk. Nothing wrong. Back soon.*

Morriumur drew their lips to another calm line, and I noticed that the right half of them was redder than it had been a few days ago. I wondered if that was confirmation that Morriumur was getting closer to being born. Though, was *born* even the right word?

They beckoned me with an understated wave of the hand, the palm up—a dione gesture distinctly different from the yell or wave that someone from Detritus might have used. I started along the walkway with them, entering the flood of creatures that were always moving along these streets. The constant presence of all these people made me feel trapped.

I’d felt the same way sometimes back in Igneous. That was part of why I’d fled into the caverns to explore. I hated always being surrounded by people, hated walking shoulder to shoulder. Morriumur barely seemed to notice it. They walked beside me, hands clasped behind their back, as if trying very hard to be unassuming. Nobody on the walkway gave the flight suits much of a second glance. Back on Detritus, people noticed pilots and made way for them. Here, we were just two more strange faces in a sea of oddities.

“This is good,” Morriumur told me. “This is what friends do—go out together.”

“You say that like . . . it’s a new experience for you.”

“It is,” Morriumur said. “Two months of life is not so long, and . . . well, to be honest, I do not find the process of bonding to be easy. My rightparent is very good at it, making friends and talking to people, but that is not an attribute this version of me seems like it will inherit.”



“Scud,” I said. “I’m going to be blunt, Morriumur, the way you say that hurts my brain. You remember some things your parents knew, but not all of it?”

“Yes,” Morriumur said. “And the baby I become will remember the same: a mix of both parents, with many holes to fill in with my own experiences. Of course, that mixture might change, based on how many times we pupate.”

“You say that so . . . frankly,” I said. “I don’t like the idea of society modifying someone before they’re born.”

“It’s not society,” Morriumur said. “It’s my parents. They simply want to find a personality for me that will have the best chance for success.”

“But if they decide to try again, instead of having you, it’s kind of the same thing as you dying.”

“No, not really,” Morriumur said, cocking their head. “And even if it were, I can’t really be killed—I’m a hypothetical personality, not a final one.” They puckered their lips, a dione sign of discomfort. “I do want to be born. I think I would make an excellent pilot, and this program shows that we need pilots, right? So it’s not so terrible that maybe a dione will be born who likes to fight?”

“It sounds like something your people need,” I said, stepping around a flowing creature with two large eyes, but which otherwise looked like nothing so much as a living pile of mud. “See, this is the problem. If society is certain that unaggressive people are the best, only those kinds of children get born—and then they perpetuate that kind of thinking. So nobody ever gets born who contradicts the standard.”

“I . . .” Morriumur looked down. “I heard what you and Hesho said yesterday. On the *Weights and Measures*, while we were flying home?”

At first, I thought they meant the conversation about hyperdrives—and I panicked for a second—before remembering the earlier one where we’d complained about the Superiority and the diones. Their elite, snobby ways, presuming to be above us “lesser species.”

“I know that you dislike the Superiority,” Morriumur said. “You consider working with us to be a chore—a necessary evil. But I wanted you to know that the Superiority is wonderful too. Maybe we are too elitist, too unwilling to look at what other species give us.

“But this platform and dozens like it have existed for hundreds of years in peace. The Superiority gave my parents good lives—it gives millions of beings good lives. By controlling hyperdrives, we *prevent* so much suffering. There haven’t been any major conflicts since the human wars. If a species gets rowdy or dangerous, we can just leave them to themselves. It’s not so bad. We don’t *owe* them our technology, particularly if they’re not going to be peaceful.”

Morriumur led us down several streets, past a multitude of shops and buildings with signs that I couldn’t read. I tried not to be overwhelmed by it all, tried not to look like I was watching each and every one of these strange creatures. But I couldn’t help it. What secrets did they hide behind those faces that were trying, far too hard, to pretend to be pleasant?

“What about people who complain or don’t fit with your society?” I asked. “What happens to them? That person who was protesting out in front of the docks? Where are they now?”

“Exile is the fate of many who make trouble,” Morriumur said. “But again, do we *owe* species the right to live on our stations? Can’t you focus on all the individuals we’re helping, instead of the few that we can’t figure out how to fit?”

It seemed to me that the ones who didn’t fit were the most significant—the real measure of what it was like to live in the Superiority. Besides, I kept repeating to myself the most important fact: that these people had suppressed and tried to exterminate mine. I didn’t know the whole story, but from what Gran-Gran had said, my direct ancestors on the *Defiant* hadn’t taken part in the main war. They’d been condemned simply for being humans, and had been chased until they’d crashed on Detritus.

Brade hadn’t caused a war, but the Superiority treated her like cavern slime. It made it hard to think about the “good” the government did when I found the exceptions so very blatant.

We walked farther, and I kept my arms pulled tight at my sides, because if I bumped someone, they apologized to me. All this false kindness, hiding their destructive ways. All this strangeness. Even Morriumur himself was an example of it. They were two people who had . . . grown together by pupating, like a caterpillar. Two people, imitating a third person.

How could I hope to understand such a people as this? I was supposed to act like this was normal? We walked around a corner, passing two Krell.

Even still, whenever I saw one of them the hair stood up on the back of my neck and a chill passed through me. The images of their armor had been used in Defiant iconography since before I'd been born.

"Can you feel them?" I found myself asking Morriumur as we passed the Krell. "Your parents?"

"Kind of," Morriumur said. "It is difficult to describe. I'm made up of them. In the end, they will decide whether to give birth, or whether to pupate and try again. So they're watching, and they're conscious—but at the same time they are not. Because I am using their brains to think, as I am using their melded bodies to move."

Scud. It was just so . . . well, *alien*.

We turned around a wall, stepping through an archway into the garden that Morriumur had been leading me to.

I froze in place and gaped. I'd been imagining some streams and maybe a waterfall, but the "water garden" was something far more grand. Enormous shimmering globes of water—easily a meter across—*floated* above the ground. They undulated and reflected light, hanging some two meters or more in the air.

Below, smaller globes emerged from spigots in the ground and floated upward as well, merging or splitting apart. Children of a hundred different species ran through the park, chasing the bubblelike chunks of water. It was like zero G, but only for the water. Indeed, when children would catch a globe of water and slap it, it would splash into a thousand smaller globes that rippled, catching light.

I ate lunch in the cockpit each day during training, and was quite familiar with how odd it could be to drink in zero G. I'd sometimes squeeze a globe of water out to hover in front of me, then stick my lips into it and suck it down. This was the same thing, only on an enormous scale.

It was gorgeous.

"Come!" Morriumur said. "It's my favorite place in the city. Just be careful! The water might splash on you."

We stepped into the park and followed a path between spigots. The children didn't all smile and laugh—diones had their characteristic lax, nonthreatening expressions, while other species would howl. One very pink child I passed was making a hiccupping sound.

Yet, seeing them together, their joy was *palpable*. Varied though they were, they were all having fun.

“How do they do this?” I asked, reaching out and tapping a bubble of water as it passed. It shook in the air, vibrating, *looking* a little like the way the sound of a deep drum *felt*.

“I’m not sure, entirely,” Morriumur said. “It has something to do with specific uses of artificial gravity and certain ionizations.” Morriumur bowed their head. I was pretty sure that was a dione method of shrugging. “My parents came here often. I inherited a love of the place from both. Here! Come sit. See that timer over there? This is the best part!”

We settled onto a bench, Morriumur leaning forward, watching a timer on the far side of the park. Most of this ground was a stone patio, without much ornamentation other than pathways of a light blue rock, lined with benches. When the timer on the far wall hit zero, all of the water bubbles in the air burst and came crashing down in a sudden rain, which made the playing children squeal and laugh, and excitedly call out to each other and their parents.

I found the sounds transfixing.

“My parents met here,” Morriumur said. “About five years ago. They’d been coming as children for many years, but it wasn’t until they were just out of training that they actually started talking to each other.”

“And they decided to pair?”

“Well, first they fell in love,” Morriumur said.

It was obvious. Of course the diones could love. Even though it was hard to imagine something as human as love existing between these creatures who were so strange.

A few Krell children ran past, wearing smaller suits of armor with two extra legs, perhaps to make it easier for the young crablike creatures to keep balanced upright. They waved arms wildly with excited joy. *This . . . this is the Superiority . . .*, I told myself. *Those are Krell. They’re trying to destroy my people. Stay angry, Spensa.*

But these children couldn’t lie. Perhaps the adults could keep up a charade like I imagined everyone here doing. The children killed that idea.

For the first time since arriving, I let my guard drop. Those children were just children. The people walking through the park, even the Krell, weren’t all plotting my destruction. They probably didn’t even *know* about Detritus.

They were people. They were all just . . . people. With strange carapaces or odd life cycles. They lived, and they *loved*.

I looked at Morriumur, whose eyes were glistening with an emotion that I instantly understood. Fondness. A person remembering something that made them happy. They didn't smile—they made the dione thin-lipped expression—but it was the same somehow.

Oh, Saints and stars. I couldn't keep up the warrior act any longer. These weren't my enemies. Some parts of the Superiority were, of course, but these people . . . they were just *people*. Mrs. Chamwit probably wasn't a spy, but was instead really just a kindly housekeeper who wanted to see me fed. And Morriumur . . . they just wanted to be a pilot.

Morriumur just wanted to fly. Like me.

"You're an excellent pilot," I told them. "Really. You have picked up on all this so quickly, it's incredible. I don't think you should give up. You need to fly to prove to the Superiority that people like you are needed."

"Are we, though?" Morriumur asked. "Are we really?"

I looked up, watching globes of water rise—undulating—into the air. I listened to the children of a hundred species, and their joyful noises.

"I know a lot of stories," I said. "About warriors and soldiers from the cadamique, my people's version of holy books." M-Bot had been briefing me on terms from Alanik's people that I should try to sprinkle into my conversation. "My grandmother would tell these tales to me—some of my first memories are of her voice calmly telling me about an ancient warrior standing against the odds."

"Those days are behind us though," Morriumur said. "In the Superiority at least. Even our training against the delvers is just a hypothetical—a plan for something that will probably never happen. All the real wars are done, so we have to plan for the maybe-halfway-implausible conflicts."

If only they knew. I closed my eyes as water splashed down, causing children to squeal.

"Those old stories have a lot of different themes," I said. "One, I never quite understood until I started flying. It happens in the epilogues. The stories *after* the stories. Warriors who have fought return home, but find they no longer belong. The battle has changed them, warped them, to the point where they are strangers. They protected the society they love, but in

so doing made themselves into something that could never again belong to it.”

“That’s . . . depressing.”

“It is, but it isn’t, all at once. Because they may have changed, but they still *won*. And no matter how peaceful the society, conflict always finds it again. During those days of sorrow, it’s the aged soldier—the one who was bowed by battle—who can stand and protect the weak.

“You don’t fit in, but you’re not broken, Morriumur. You’re just *different*. And they’re going to need you someday. I promise it.”

I opened my eyes and looked to them, trying to give the dione version of a smile—with lips pressed tight.

“Thank you,” they said. “I hope you’re right. And yet at the same time, I hope you aren’t.”

“Welcome to the life of a soldier.” A thought struck me. A stupid one, maybe—but I had to try. “I just wish my people could help more. I’ve been invited to try out as a pilot because some parts of your government recognize that they need us. I think my people could be your people’s warriors.”

“Maybe,” Morriumur said. “I don’t know that we’d want to put that burden on your people.”

“I think we’d be fine,” I said. “All we’d really need to know is . . . how to hyperjump. You know, so we could properly protect the galaxy.”

“Ah, I see what you’re doing, Alanik. But there’s no use. I don’t know how it works! I have no memories from either parent explaining the secret of hyperjumps. Even we aren’t told. Otherwise, hostile aliens could just kidnap us and try to get the secret.”

“That wasn’t . . . I mean . . .” I grimaced. “I guess I was kind of obvious, wasn’t I?”

“You needn’t feel bad!” Morriumur said. “I’d be worried if you *didn’t* want to know the secret. Just trust me, you don’t want it. Hyperjumps are dangerous. The technology is best entrusted to those who know what they’re doing.”

“Yeah. I suppose.”

We started back, and—from my limited ability to read diones—I felt like Morriumur’s mood was far improved. I should have felt likewise, but each step I took reinforced to me the stark truth I’d finally confronted.

We humans weren't at war with an all-powerful, terrible, nefarious force of evil. We were at war with a bunch of laughing children and millions, if not billions, of regular people. And scud, I'd just talked one of their pilots into staying on the job.

This place was doing strange things to my emotions and my sense of duty.

"I'm glad you're in our flight, Alanik," Morriumur told me as we stepped up to the embassy. "I think you might have the right amount of aggression. I can learn from you."

"Don't be so sure," I said. "I might be more aggressive than you think. I mean, my people did live with the humans for many years."

"Humans can't be happy though," Morriumur said. "They don't understand the concept—even Brade indicates this is true, if you listen to her. Without proper training, humans are just mindless killing machines. You are so much more. You fight when you need to, but enjoy floating bursts of water when you don't! If I prove myself to my family, it will be because I show them that I can be like you."

I suppressed a sigh, opening the door. Doomslug sat on the ledge just inside, impatient for my return. Scud. Hopefully Morriumur wouldn't—

"What is *that*?" Morriumur demanded. They were baring their teeth in a strange look of aggression and hatred.

I stepped inside. "Um . . . it's my pet slug. Nothing to worry about."

Morriumur pushed into the door in a very forward manner, making me scoop up Doomslug and cradle her, backing away. Morriumur closed the door most of the way, then peeked back out the crack. They spun on me. "Did you get permission to bring a venomous animal into Starsight? Do you have a license?"

"No . . .," I said. "I mean, I didn't ask."

"You need to destroy the thing!" Morriumur said. "That's a taynix. They're *deadly*."

I looked down at Doomslug, who fluted questioningly.

"It's not a taynix," I promised. "Different species entirely. They just *look* similar. I hold her all the time, and nothing has happened to me."

Morriumur grimaced again. Looking at me holding Doomslug protectively, however, they pushed their lips back to a line. "Just . . . just don't show it to anyone else, all right? You could get into serious trouble."

Even if it's not a taynix." They stepped back out the door. "Thank you for being a friend, Alanik. If I should end up being born with a different personality . . . well, I like the idea of having known you first."

I locked the door after they left. "You shouldn't come down here," I scolded Doomslug. "Honestly, how did you even get down all those steps?" I carried her back up to my room, where I put her on the bed, then closed that door and locked it too—for no good reason.

"Spensa?" M-Bot said. "You're back! What happened? What did they want?"

I shook my head and sat down by the window, looking out at all those people. I'd been so determined to see them as my enemies. It had kept me focused. For some reason though, I found the idea that they were indifferent to be even more frightening.

"Spensa?" M-Bot finally said again. "Spensa, you should see this."

I frowned, turning toward the monitor on the wall. M-Bot switched it to a news station.

It showed an image of Detritus from space, with a caption underneath. *Human scourge close to escaping its prison.*



It *was* Detritus. The planet's enormous metal layers spun around it slowly in the void, lit by a sun I'd rarely seen. My breath caught. The screen scrolled news feeds across the bottom, but a dione was doing a voice-over as well. My pin translated their words.

"These stunning shots were smuggled back from an anonymous worker who claims to have been stationed at the human preserve for some time now."

The image cut to a close-up of Defiant starfighters engaged in a dogfight with Krell drones. Flashing destructors lit up the void near the ever-watchful defense platforms.

"This seems proof," the reporter said, "that the human problem is not confined to the past, as once thought. Our anonymous source says that containment of the humans has been bungled by an increasingly lax Department of Protective Services. The source cites key problems as being poor oversight and a failure to properly deploy suppression tactics. As you can easily see from this footage, the human infestation has begun to overwhelm defenses."

The screen cut to a shot of Winzik standing calmly behind a podium. The voice-over from the reporter continued, "Superiority Minister of Protective Services, Ohz Burtim Winzik, insists that the risk is overblown."

"This strain of humans," said Winzik, "*remains* fully contained. We have no evidence that they know how to escape their system, which is light-years from any other inhabited planet. The administration is working carefully to eliminate any danger these humans pose, but we assure you, the threat has been greatly exaggerated by the press."

I walked up to the screen, stumbling over some boxes, unable to tear my eyes away from the video of another set of dogfighting ships. Was that me?

Yes, from the fight I'd engaged in right before saving Alanik's ship from crashing.

"This news has started popping up on all the channels," M-Bot said. "It seems that one of the varvax who worked on the space station took secret videos over the last few months, then came to Starsight and leaked them."

"Leaked them?" I said. "How does that work? Can't the government just stop the news programs from playing this video? They suppress any mention of how hyperdrives work."

"It gets complicated," M-Bot said. "I believe that the government could exile the person who took this video—but they can't legally do anything about the stations that are now showing it. At least, not without specific actions that have to pass through their senate first."

How odd. I narrowed my eyes as Winzik came on the screen again. Cuna had told me about this. The Department of Protective Services tended to use flare-ups of human rebellion as a way of securing funds. Was that what they were doing here?

It seemed these images were making everyone question Winzik and his department though. Perhaps this leak really was an accident.

I leaned forward as the screen swapped to an image of a seated Krell with a light pink exoskeleton. M-Bot read the banner at the bottom, which named them: "Sssizme, Human Species Expert."

"This administration has always been too lenient with dangerous species," the expert said, waving their hands in the animated way of the Krell. "This infestation of humans is a bomb waiting to explode, and the fuse was lit the moment the Third Human War ended and human refuges were created. The government has worked hard to pretend that containment is absolute, but the truth is now leaking."

"Excuse me if I'm wrong," an interviewer said from off-screen, "but weren't we forced to preserve the humans? Because of mandated conservation of cultures and societies?"

"An outdated law," the expert said. "The need to preserve the cultures of dangerous species must be balanced against the need to protect the peaceful species of the Superiority." The crablike Krell waved to the side, and the camera zoomed out, showing a young human man sitting at a table. He remained in place, saying nothing, as the expert continued.

“You can see here a licensed and monitored human. Though many people are frightened of their fearsome reputation, in truth humans are no more dangerous than the average lesser species. They are aggressive, yes, but not on the level of, say, a cormax drone or the wrexians.

“The danger of humans comes from their unusual mix of attributes—including the fact that their physiology creates a large number of cytonics. Normally, by the time a species has cultivated cytonics and early hyperdrive capacity, they have also found their way to a peaceful society. Humans are aggressive, industrious, and—most importantly—quick to spread, capable of surviving in extreme environments. This is a deadly combination.”

“So,” the interviewer said, “how do you think this infestation should be dealt with?”

“Exterminate it,” the expert said.

The camera cut to a shot of the interviewer, a dione who—best I could judge—looked utterly horrified by the idea. “Barbaric!” they exclaimed, standing up. “How could you even *suggest* such a thing?”

“It would be barbaric,” the expert said calmly, “if we were talking about a race of intelligent beings. But the humans of this particular planet . . . they’re more insects than people. It is obvious that the Detritus refuge has failed in its purpose, and for the good of all the galaxy, it must be cleansed.”

The expert gestured to the human beside him. “Besides, this man is proof that the human species will not end if we destroy one rogue planet. Humans can coexist with the Superiority, but they must *not* be allowed to self-govern. It was foolish to attempt to keep Detritus.

“And for the record, I don’t accept the excuses that the administration gives for why the humans were allowed access to technology in the first place. This talk of keeping them focused by providing space battles to engage them? Nonsense. The administration is making excuses to cover up an uncontrolled explosion of human aggression that began some ten years ago. High Minister Ved should have listened to the advice of experts such as myself, and dealt with the humans more harshly.”

I sank down into the seat as the report returned to playing the recorded dogfights. I’d lived my entire life knowing that the Krell were trying to exterminate us, but to hear someone speak of us this way . . . so dispassionately . . . At my request, M-Bot changed the station to another,

which had a panel of experts talking. Another channel showed the same footage.

The more I watched, the more *small* I felt. The way these newspeople spoke . . . stole something precious from me. It reduced my entire people—our heroism, our deaths, our struggles—to an outbreak of pests. I walked to the window again.

No chaos in the streets. People streaming in and out of their shops, going about their lives. Oddly, even as I found it difficult to summon my hatred for them, I *did* feel a growing hatred for the government that ruled them. The government hadn't just killed my father; now they made him out to be some insect to be swatted.

*Tiny*, a part of me thought, looking out at the people flowing on those streets. *All so tiny*.

The Superiority thought they were so grand? They too were just insects. Biting bugs. An itching noise that needed to be silenced. Why were these pests snapping at me? It would take barely a thought to smother them all, and . . .

And what was I thinking? I lurched back from the window, feeling sick. I felt the eyes watching me all around, and somehow understood them. Those thoughts about insects were *their* thoughts.

I . . . Something was happening to me. Something related to the delvers, the nowhere, and my abilities. M-Bot worried he was the shadow. But he had no idea.

I looked at the desk where I'd been working. There sat the casing, perhaps as large as a human head, where I'd attached the three components I'd taken out of M-Bot. I seized it and stomped out of my room, leaving Doomslug to trill questioningly after me.

I climbed onto the roof, then crawled under the tarp that hid M-Bot. The drone lay where I'd left it, sitting on my seat in his cockpit, attached to the console by wires.

"How much longer?" I asked him. "Until you're done programming it?"

"I'm finished," M-Bot said. "I was done not long after you left the house with Morriumur. I would like a day to run it through diagnostic tests."

"No time," I said. "Show me how to hook this piece I built onto the bottom."

He popped a set of instructions up on his monitor, and I worked quietly, affixing wires and screwing my makeshift sensor bundle onto the bottom of the reprogrammed drone.

“I am monitoring eighty different Superiority channels,” M-Bot noted. “Many of them are talking about Detritus.”

I kept working.

“Most of the people talking on these shows are angry, Spensa,” he said. “They’re making an outcry for stronger measures to be used against your people.”

“What stronger measures could they make than parking a fleet of battleships on our doorstep?” I asked.

“I’m running simulations, and none of the outcomes are good.” M-Bot paused. “Your people need hyperdrives. The only way to escape such an overwhelming force is to run.”

I held up the drone, then activated it. The two small acclivity rings began to glow with a deep blue color underneath the wings, holding the thing in the air somewhat precariously, with the large sensor module attached to the bottom.

“Drone?” I asked. “Are you awake?”

“Integrated AI install successful,” the drone said in a monotone voice.

“How are you feeling?”

“I do not understand how to answer that question,” it said.

“It’s not alive,” M-Bot said. “Or . . . well, it’s not whatever . . . I am.”

“Drone,” I said. “Engage active camouflage.”

It vanished—projecting a hologram onto its exterior that made it look like I was seeing through it. That, plus the sensor scrambler, should hide it from all but the most dedicated scan.

“Active camouflage has weaknesses,” M-Bot noted. “It’s impossible to properly make something invisible from all angles using this kind of technology. Look at it from the side, then have it move.”

I twisted around, and he was right. From the side, the invisibility wasn’t nearly as convincing—there was a ripple in the air marking where the drone was. When it moved, the ripple was more noticeable.

“Our best chance of having it remain unseen is for it to hover up high where nobody will accidentally run into it,” M-Bot said. “Then we have it move slowly, with orders to freeze if anyone looks directly at it. If only one

person is glancing at it, the drone can adapt to their perspective and remain hidden. The more people looking at it from different angles, the worse it will stand out.”

“Can it obey those orders?” I asked.

“Yes. It has basic intelligence, and I copied over a large chunk of my stealth infiltration protocols. It should be able to explore, take pictures of the area we want it to, then return to its hiding place for pickup.” M-Bot paused again. “It can fly by itself, something I cannot do. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said it wasn’t alive, for in some ways it is more alive than I am.”

I thought about that, then opened the compartment on the side of the cockpit and took out the small emergency destructor pistol I kept there.

“Drone,” I said, “deactivate hologram.”

It appeared just above me, hovering near the open canopy and the tarp draped around M-Bot outside. I made sure the destructor pistol’s safety was activated, then secured it with electrical tape to the back of the drone, so I could smuggle it in as well.

“If you get into too much trouble,” M-Bot said, “remember that you have a second face programmed into your bracelet. You can become someone else, if ‘Alanik’ gets compromised and you need to hide.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. But in any case, Detritus is running out of time. We’re going to have to try this plan tomorrow.”

# PART FOUR

## INTERLUDE

Jorgen spent his day learning how to make bread.

Spensa's grandmother was very good at bread, despite the fact that she was blind. Together they sat in her cramped, single-room home in Igneous. Spensa's mother had accepted new quarters, but her grandmother had insisted she remain here. She claimed she liked the "feel" of it.

Red light flooded in through the window, and the air smelled of heat from the apparatus. You could smell heat, Jorgen had realized. Or at least hot metal. It was a burned sort of smell, but not a *burning* smell. The smell of things that had gone so far beyond being on fire that now their ashes were stewing.

Gran-Gran made him work like her, by touch and smell alone. He closed his eyes, reaching out and feeling at an iron pot to test the powder inside. He brought a pinch to his nose and sniffed it.

"This is the flour," he said, breathing in the wholesome—yet somehow still *dirty*—scent of ground grain. "I need about five hundred grams." He took a measuring cup in hand and dipped it in, weighing it by feel—not by sight. He hefted it, then felt for the bowl in his lap and dumped the flour in.

"Good," Gran-Gran said.

He mixed it with his hand for a count of a hundred. "Now oil," he said, raising the proper container to his nose. He sniffed it, then nodded and tipped it so oil dribbled over his finger into the bowl. She wanted him to measure like that, by *touch* of all things. Water followed.

"Very good," Gran-Gran said. She had a patient voice. A voice like a rock would have, he imagined. Immobile, ancient, and thoughtful.

"I would rather check to see that I got the amount right," Jorgen said. "I didn't really *measure* anything."

"Of course you did," she said.

"Not accurately."



“Mix it. Feel the dough. Does it feel right?”

He mixed, his eyes still closed. She refused to let him use an electric mixer. Instead he mixed by hand, squishing the stretchy dough between his fingers as the ingredients melded.

“It . . . ,” he said. “It’s too dry.”

“Ah.” She reached out and felt into his bowl. “So it is, so it is. Knead in some water then.”

He did so, still keeping his eyes closed.

“You’ve never peeked,” Gran-Gran noted. “When I taught Spensa to do this, she kept looking through one eye. I had to challenge her to do it without looking, make it a game, before she’d do as I asked.”

Jorgen continued kneading. He had given up on trying to figure out how Gran-Gran would know if he’d peeked or not. She was obviously blind—the gnarled old woman had only milky whites for eyes. But there was a *power* to her. Near her he felt that same buzzing, fainter than with Spensa or the alien woman.

“You never complain either,” Gran-Gran noted. “Five days learning to bake bread by touch, and you’ve never once asked why I’m making you do this.”

“I was instructed by my superior officer to come receive your training. I assume it will make sense eventually.”

Gran-Gran sniffed at that. As if . . . as if she *wanted* him to balk at the strange style of instruction. Well, Jorgen had talked to dozens of soldiers about their first days in training, and the monotonous tasks they’d been given. It happened more in the ground crew than in flight school, but he understood nonetheless.

Gran-Gran was training him first to accept instruction. He could do that. That made sense. But he wished she’d hurry. On the same day as that first attack, the battleships had made two more test barrages at Detritus, and both had been intercepted. Since then, the enemy forces had just sat up there gathering resources, their fleet growing. The Krell’s return to inaction had him feeling tense.

The Krell had a very large gun to their heads. He needed to learn this new training quickly, and ascertain whether he could give the fleet what it needed, then report back to Cobb.

That said, he wasn't going to complain. Gran-Gran was effectively now his commanding officer.

"Do you hear anything?" Gran-Gran asked as he continued to work the dough.

"The buzzing sensation from you," he said. "As I reported earlier. It's not really something I *hear* though. It's more of an impression. Like the vibration you might feel from a distant machine, making the ground tremble."

"And if you reach out, like I taught you?" she said. "If you imagine yourself flying through space?"

Jorgen tried to do as she said, but it didn't accomplish anything. Just . . . imagining himself floating in space? Passing the stars, soaring? He had been there in his ship, and he could picture the experience perfectly. What was it supposed to do?

"Nothing?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"No singing? No sense of something far distant calling to you?"

"No, sir," he said. "Um, I mean no, Gran-Gran."

"She's out there," Gran-Gran said, ancient voice cracking as she whispered the words. "And she's worried."

Jorgen snapped his eyes open. He caught a glimpse of Gran-Gran, a wizened old woman who seemed to be all bones and cloth, with powder-white hair and milky eyes. She'd turned her head upward, toward the sky.

He immediately squeezed his eyes shut. "Sorry," he said. "I peeked. But . . . but you can *feel* her?"

"Yes," Gran-Gran said softly. "It only happened earlier today. I sensed that she was alive. Scared, though she might not admit that even still."

"Can you get a report on her mission?" he asked, dough squeezing through his fingers as he clutched it. "Or bring her back?"

"No," Gran-Gran said. "Our touch was momentary, fleeting. I am not strong enough for more. I shouldn't bring her back, even if I could. She needs to fight this fight."

"What fight? She's in danger?"

"Yes. Same as we are. More? Perhaps. Stretch out, Jorgen. Fly among the stars. Listen to them."

He tried. Oh, how he tried. He strained with what he thought were the right muscles. He pushed and forced himself to imagine what she'd said.

That nothing happened made him feel as if he were letting Spensa down. And he hated that feeling.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't get anything. Perhaps we should try one of my cousins." He knuckled his hand, pressing it against his forehead, eyes still squeezed closed. "I shouldn't have told her to go. I should have followed the rules. This is my fault."

Gran-Gran grunted. "Back to your dough," she said. Once he continued kneading, she spoke again. "Have I told you the story of Stanislav, the hero of the almost-war?"

"The . . . almost-war?"

"It was back on Old Earth," Gran-Gran said, and he could hear bowls scrape as she began preparing her own dough to bake. "During a time when two great nations had their terrible weapons pointed at one another, and the entire world waited, tense, fearing what would happen if the giants should decide to war."

"I know that feeling," Jorgen said. "With Krell weapons pointed at us."

"Indeed. Well, Stanislav was a simple duty officer, in charge of the sensor equipment that would warn his people if an attack had been launched. His duty was to report *immediately* if the sensors saw anything."

"So his people could get away in time?" Jorgen asked.

"No, no. These were weapons like the Krell bombers use. Life-ending weapons. There was no escape; Stanislav's people knew that if an attack came from the enemy, they were doomed. His job was not to prevent this, but to provide warning, so retaliation could be sent. That way, both nations would be destroyed, not just one.

"I imagine his life to be one of tense quiet, of hoping—wishing, praying—that he never had to do his job. For if he did, it would mean an end to billions. Such a burden."

"What burden?" Jorgen said. "He wasn't a general; the decision wasn't his. He was just an operator. All he had to do was relay information."

"And yet," Gran-Gran said softly, "he *didn't*. A warning came in. The computer system said that the enemy had launched! The terrible day had come, and Stanislav knew that if the reading was real, everyone he had ever met, everyone he loved, was as good as dead. Only, he was suspicious. 'The

enemy has launched too few missiles,' he reasoned. 'And this new system has not been tested properly.' He debated, and he fretted, and then he did not call and tell his superiors what had happened."

"He disobeyed orders!" Jorgen said. "He failed in his most fundamental duty." He kneaded his dough more furiously, pressing it against the base of the wide, shallow bowl.

"Indeed," Gran-Gran said. "His will was tested, however, as the computer reported another launch. Larger this time, though still suspiciously small. He debated. He knew that his duty was to send his people to launch their retaliation. To send death to their enemies while still able. The man and the soldier warred inside him.

"In the end, he declared the computer's report to be a false alarm. He waited, sweating . . . until no missiles arrived. That day, he became the only hero of a war that never happened. The man who prevented the end of the world."

"He still disobeyed," Jorgen said. "It wasn't his job to make the decision he did. It belonged to his superiors. The fact that he was right makes the story justify him in the end, but if he'd been wrong, then he would be remembered as a coward at best, a traitor at worst."

"If he'd been wrong," Gran-Gran whispered, "he wouldn't *have been* remembered. For nobody would have lived to remember him."

Jorgen sat back and opened his eyes. He looked down at the firm dough in his hands, then started working it harder, folding it and pushing it, feeling angry for reasons he couldn't explain. "Why are you telling me this story?" he demanded of Gran-Gran. "Spensa said you always told her stories of people cutting off the heads of monsters."

"I told her those stories because she needed them."

"So you think *I* need a story like this? Because I like following orders? I'm not an emotionless machine, Gran-Gran. I *helped* Spensa rebuild her spaceship. At least, I didn't tell anyone what she was doing when she brought Hurl's booster back. *Against* protocol."

Gran-Gran didn't reply, so Jorgen kept working the dough, smashing it over and over, folding it like the old swordsmiths used to fold metal.

"Everyone thinks that just because I like a little structure, a little organization, I'm some kind of alien! Well excuse me for trying to see that structure exists. If everyone were like this Stanislav, then the military would

be chaos! No soldier would fire his gun, out of fear that maybe the order he'd been given was a false alarm! No pilot would fly, because who knows, maybe your sensors are wrong and there *is* no enemy!"

He slammed the dough down and sat back against the wall.

Gran-Gran grabbed his dough, pressing it between her fingers. "Excellent," she said. "Finally some good kneading out of you, boy. *That* will be some bread."

"I—"

"Close your eyes," Gran-Gran said. "Humph."

Jorgen wiped his brow with his sleeve. He hadn't realized how worked up he'd gotten. "Look, maybe I was right to tell Spensa to go. But maybe I shouldn't have. I'm not—"

"Close your eyes, boy!"

He thumped his head back against the wall, but did as she asked.

"What do you hear?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Don't be daft. You hear the machinery outside, the apparatus crashing and thudding?"

"Well yes, obviously. But—"

"And the people on the street, clamoring home after shift change?"

"I guess."

"And your heartbeat? Do you hear that?"

"I don't know."

"*Try.*"

He sighed, but did as instructed, trying to listen. He could hear it thumping inside him, but probably only because he'd let himself get worked up.

"Stanislav wasn't a hero *because* he disobeyed orders," Gran-Gran said. "He was a hero because he knew *when* to disobey orders. I learned that from my mother, who brought us here—one of her last acts. I think she felt something here. Something we needed."

"Then I shouldn't be looking toward the stars," Jorgen said, still frustrated. "We should be looking at the planet beneath us."

"I always wanted to return to the stars," Gran-Gran said.

"I like flying," Jorgen said, his eyes still closed. "Don't mistake my meaning. At the same time, this is my home. I don't want to escape it, I

want to *protect* it. And sometimes when I'm lying quietly in bed in the deep caverns, I swear that I . . ."

"You what?" Gran-Gran asked.

Jorgen snapped his eyes open. "I do hear something. But it's not up above us. It's down below."

I yanked open my backpack, letting a dione soldier inspect the contents.

The inside didn't look suspicious at all. Just the large, clear plastic food container that I normally brought my lunches in. It looked perfectly innocent. For all the fact that it was a drone in disguise.

The guard shined a small flashlight in at the contents. Would they see how worried I was? Was I sweating too much? Would one of the nearby security drones sense my racing pulse?

No. No, I could *do* this. I was a warrior, and sometimes that required craftiness and stealth. I stood there an excruciatingly long moment. Then, bless the stars, the guard waved me forward.

I zipped up the pack and shouldered it, hurrying across the shuttle bay of the *Weights and Measures*. I tried to exude both confidence and lack of concern.

"Alanik?" Morriumur asked, stepping up beside me as we entered the hallway. "Are you well? Your skin tone looks uncommonly flush."

"I . . . um, didn't sleep well," I said.

We neared the first intersection. M-Bot suspected that this segment of hallway had a secondary scanner installed to detect illicit materials—but he was confident that the scrambler we'd given the drone would obscure it. Indeed, no alarms went off as we went through the intersection, though a passing dione crew member did nearly collide with Hesho's small hoverplatform. Kauri cried out, barely steering the platform around the dione's head.

The crew member apologized and quickly moved on. Kauri flew the platform back, and Hesho's tail twitched in annoyance as he looked over his shoulder at the offending dione. "Even when we fly, we are underfoot. Serene until marred, a centimeter deep but reflecting eternity, I am a sea to many, but a puddle to one."

“You’d think that the Superiority would be accustomed to dealing with people of all sizes,” I said.

“There aren’t many of us,” Hesho said. “I know of only one other species our size, unless you count the varvax inside their exoskeletons. Perhaps we will need to build huge suits ourselves. It is difficult for ordinary people in a universe of giants.” His tail twitched again. “But this is the price we must pay to have allies against the humans. They are near to breaking free, you know. Did you see the news reports?”

He eyed Brade, who as usual strode on ahead of us and barely paid any attention to our conversation.

“The humans are contained, Hesho,” Morriumur said. “This little blip is nothing to be worried about. I’m sure it will be dealt with soon.”

“My duty, and my burden, is to worry about the worst possibilities.”

As we reached the now-familiar intersection with the usual guard and the pathway to Engineering, I split off from the others, waving them onward. “Gotta hit the head,” I told them, then stepped up to the guard.

The Krell twitched her fingers in a sign of annoyance, but called for a guide drone to accompany me to the restroom. I thought through my plan once again—I’d spent all night practicing it with M-Bot. I wasn’t worried about being tired from lack of sleep. My nervous energy probably could have powered half of Starsight.

The guide drone led me to the restroom, then again waited as I entered one of the stalls. I immediately sat and put the backpack on my lap, then quietly slid open the zipper. My hands—having performed this exact sequence a hundred times in a row last night—pulled out my drone, then took out the security module. I screwed it on with a quiet *click* that I hoped wasn’t too audible.

A flip of a switch left the drone hanging in the air as I quickly did my business in the stall, so as to not sound suspicious. Then I squeezed around the side of the stall, leaving the drone hovering there. I held up one finger, then two, then three.

The drone vanished, activating its camouflage. Then I tapped my bracelet, checking to make sure the drone and I could communicate. It responded by sending me a message in DDF flight code that my bracelet tapped out on my skin.

*All systems functioning.*



The mission was a go. The *Weights and Measures*'s shielding prevented me from contacting M-Bot on the outside, but—as we had hoped—I could still communicate with someone inside, such as the drone.

I shouldered my pack and stepped out—then had an immediate regret. *The destructor pistol!* Scud, I'd meant to detach it and put it in my backpack in case I needed it.

Too late now. It was safely, and uselessly, strapped to the back of the drone.

*Good luck, little guy,* I thought, washing my hands. A part of me kept expecting the security drone to suddenly raise an alarm, but it remained silent. I followed my guide from the restroom, leaving my secret spy behind, ready to slip out and sneak to the engine room.

I reached the jump room and settled down with the others. Then I waited. And waited some more. Was it taking an unusually long amount of time for us to disengage from the docks and take off? Had I already been discovered?

Finally, the *Weights and Measures* undocked and began to move out into space.

“Pilots,” Winzik's voice said over the comm, making me jump practically to the ceiling. “I wanted to let you know that today's training is particularly important. My, my! We bear a number of important officials from the Superiority government, who have come to watch your progress. As a favor to me, I'd like you to fly your best and impress them.”

Today? Of all days, *today* was the day that extra observers came on the ship to watch? I almost contacted my drone and told it to abort. But no. I was committed.

I waited in silence as we got a safe distance from Starsight, and then a scream sounded in my mind and we entered the nowhere.

I didn't have much opportunity to worry about the drone and its mission during training that day.

I shot through space, pursued by a swarm of self-propelled imitation boulders. Brade flew close at my wing, and together we tried to dart toward the delver maze—but the embers were ready for that. Another group of them broke off the outside of the maze and streamed toward us.

“Veer pattern,” I said. “Cutting right.” I spun my starfighter, boosting. That shot me to the side, though my momentum still carried me forward as well.

My proximity sensor showed that Brade—instead of following my orders—barreled toward the new set of embers. I growled, hitting the private line. “Brade, follow orders!”

“I can take these embers,” she said.

“No doubt that you can. But can you *follow orders*?”

She continued toward the embers. Then, just before engaging them, she veered off and broke away, boosting toward me. I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“All right,” I said. “Veer pattern, cutting right.”

I turned us around in a wide sweep, away from the embers. Brade followed, and together we wove around as I had ordered. “All right,” I said, coming in at a better angle. “Let loose.”

“Really?” she asked.

“I’ll follow your lead.”

I sensed an eagerness to her as she boosted ahead of me. The embers were predictable in how they would try to smash into us, so the way we had cut around had bunched them all up in front of us. Brade had little trouble blasting a group of them away.

I, in turn, shot the one that drew too close to her. We both took some debris on our shields, but emerged mostly unscathed as we dove between the two advancing packs of embers.

These, in their eagerness to hit us, began crashing into one another. We emerged as a good dozen of the enemy crashed together in a sequence of fiery deaths behind us.

“That,” Brade said as we boosted on toward the maze, “was extremely satisfying.”

“Once in a while, I know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t listen to you because of that.”

“Why, then?”

“You don’t talk to me like the others,” she said. “You didn’t even ask me about that planet of wild humans. I’m sure you saw the news reports. Everyone’s scared of them right now. Everyone looks at me, even more

than they used to. They tell me they know *I'm* not like those dangerous ones. But still, they look at me."

Scud. *There's an entire planet where we won't treat you like that, Brade.* I almost told her right then, but forced myself to hold back. It didn't feel like the right time.

"To me," I said, "you're just a member of my flight."

"Yeah," she said. "I like that."

I'd suspected she would. The two of us veered down near the maze. Today's training was to fight through the embers, then do maze runs, like we'd need to do if fighting a real delver. We drew close to our section of the maze, the sheer metallic surface punctured by tunnel entrances. In the near distance, three other fighters came in close: Vapor, Hesho, and Morriumur.

"Let's take that one," I said, tapping my display, which would highlight the indicated point on Brade's own display.

"Roger," she said.

I made the move, then was shocked as my proximity alarm went crazy. I veered out of the way, boosting to the side as a pair of embers suddenly accelerated from the surface at explosive speeds, nearly colliding with my ship. They'd never moved that fast before. I cursed, reorienting myself as the ones chasing me picked up speed too. I had to boost to Mag-4—an insane speed for dogfighting—to stay ahead of them.

"What is this?" Brade said over the comm. "Flight Command, what are you doing?"

I narrowly avoided another pair of embers. I had to speed up again, but another group approaching turned and began smashing against one another. What in the stars?

*They're trying to get me to smash into their debris,* I realized. And their high speed made me boost faster. It was nearly impossible to dogfight at such speeds; there just wasn't enough time to react—but embers didn't need to care about that. They were disposable, while we were not.

What followed was some of the most frantic piloting I'd done in weeks. "Wave sequence," I said to Brade—and she fell right on my wing as we ducked and wove among the embers. Scud! There suddenly seemed to be *hundreds* of them, all focusing on us, ignoring other pilots.

I jerked to the side as two embers collided right near me, then braced myself as debris flashed across my shield, wearing it down. Another ember

nearly hit me, and I dodged belatedly—if it had been on target, I’d have been smashed. I felt like a solitary sparrow among an entire flock of hungry hawks.

I swooped and wove, spun and dodged, trying to make sense of the chaos. “My . . . my shield is down,” Brade said with a grunt.

Scud. Scudscudscudscud. She’d veered off from me, so I spun around, then boosted after her. “See that large ember coming at you from just below your 270? Spear it with your light-lance.”

“But—”

“Just *do it*, Brade,” I said. I barely got out of the way as the ember flew past us at a horrific speed. Fortunately, as I’d suggested, Brade shot her light-lance at it and hit the thing in the center with her glowing rope.

The momentum of the large stone yanked her after it—and right out of the path of several other embers, which smashed together. I swung around and chased her, accelerating so hard my GravCaps got overwhelmed and I slammed back in my seat. I barely managed to keep pace, as I had to shoot down an ember that tried to collide with Brade, then swoop in beside her to shield her from the debris.

My shield crackled and my ship shook. Ahead, the large ember we’d been trailing cleared us a path before finally slowing, as if its pilot had realized what we were doing.

“Up and over!” I shouted, dodging upward. Brade let go just as another large ember smashed into the one we’d been following. She barely dodged a large chunk ejected from the collision, but together the two of us boosted free of the mess. Our incredible speed carried us far beyond the melee in seconds.

“That . . . ,” Brade said. “That was close.” She actually seemed shaken for once.

“Flight Command,” I said, hitting the comm button, “what in the stars was *that*?”

“I am sorry, Alanik of the UrDail.” Winzik replied personally, which was uncommon. “Occasionally, the embers have been observed engaging in extremely aggressive behavior like this. We are trying new boosters on our drones to match it.”

“You could have *warned* us!” I snapped.

“Very sorry!” Winzik said. “Please do not be offended. Brade, thank you. You have made a *very* impressive showing for the officials here.”

So Winzik was showing off his pet human, was he? He could have gotten her, and me, killed!

Brade didn’t seem to care. With this new batch of embers disposed of, she spun back around toward the maze itself. I boosted after her. A second later we darted through one of the openings, entering the tunnel.

It seemed quieter inside.

That was silly, of course. Space was *always* silent. Sure, I could set my ship to simulate explosions and vibrations to give me nonvisual cues, but no atmosphere means no compression waves, and no compression waves means no sound.

That normally felt right to me. Soaring through the void was supposed to be silent. The darkness was so empty, so awesome, so vast that it *should* smother all sound.

These tunnels inside the maze felt more intimate. I felt like I should hear clanks, drips of water, or at least distant screeching as gears ground together. Here, the silence was creepy.

My floods illuminated Brade’s ship, flying just ahead of me. She slowed to an uncharacteristically careful speed, inching along the corridor.

“Do you see that opening ahead?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. Both of us seeing it confirmed it was real—though openings like the one ahead almost always were. It was the things the holograms covered up that could get confusing.

We crept into the room beyond, which was one of the spaces that felt like it was submerged. There were even holographic fish swarming around in schools, and some dark thing in the corner that bore multiple tentacles.

I’d been in this “room” several times before. They were starting to repeat. The illusions on our canopies were Superiority tech, bounded by the limitations of their programming. The true delver maze would be more erratic. Pilots who had entered and escaped reported a different setting to each room, with surprises around every corner.

I asked Brade what she was seeing, as that was part of the training. But I knew this room too well, so even while she was describing what she saw, I was ready when the octopus thing sprang from the corner. I knew it wasn’t real—but that it would distract from an ember coming in behind us.

I spun and blasted the ember away before it could reach me.

“Nice shot,” Brade said.

Wow. A *compliment*? I *was* getting through to her.

She led the way down to the bottom of the chamber, where to my eyes the exit was covered in some kind of seaweedlike substance.

“You see something here?” she asked.

“Some kind of sea growth.”

“I see rocks.” She grunted. “Like last time.”

She lowered her ship down through the hologram, and I followed, entering another metallic tunnel.

“I half expect Winzik to try to get us killed again,” I noted as I tailed her.

“Winzik is brilliant,” Brade said immediately. “He knows exactly what he’s doing. Obviously, he understood our limits better than we did.”

“He got lucky,” I said. “His stunt out there would have looked really stupid if we’d gotten killed.”

“He is brilliant,” Brade repeated. “It’s not surprising you didn’t understand his purposes.”

I bristled at that, but bit off a retort. Brade was making small talk. This was progress.

“You grew up with Winzik?” I said. “Like, he was your father?”

“More like my keeper,” she said.

“And your parents? Your biological ones?”

“I was taken from them at age seven. Humans have to be carefully monitored. We can feed off one another’s aggression, and that can quickly turn to sedition.”

“That must have been hard though. Leaving your parents when you were so young?”

Brade didn’t respond, instead leading the way down through the corridor, then into another one beneath it. I followed, frowning as the tunnel walls slowly shifted and transformed into rock ones.

*This looks familiar*, I thought.

Stalactites, stalagmites. Natural stone, looking almost melted in places from the constant dripping of water. And there, the side of an enormous metal pipe peeking through the stone?

It looked like . . . like the caverns I’d explored as a youth. The endless tunnels of Detritus, where I’d hunted rats, imagining that I was fighting the

Krell.

I paused my ship near the wall, where my floods illuminated ancient etchings. Patterns, words in an untranslatable language. I *knew* this place. Though the scale was larger, it looked exactly like a tunnel I'd traveled a hundred times, a place where I would trail my fingers on the cool wet stone. A hidden maintenance locker nearby would hold my speargun, my map book, and the pin my father had given me . . .

Almost unconsciously, I reached out toward the wall, though my fingers hit the glass of my canopy. I was in a ship, an alien starfighter, traveling through a deep-space maze. How? How had it reached into my mind and reproduced this place?

My eyes focused on the glass of my canopy. Reflected in it, as if sitting right behind me in the cockpit, were a pair of burning white spots as large as my fists. Holes puncturing reality itself, sucking in everything and crushing it into a pair of impossibly white tunnels. They looked like eyes.

The hair on my neck rose. I opened my mouth to shout, but the eyes vanished—and along with them the changes to the tunnel. In an instant, I was back in just another metallic corridor, one of a thousand in this maze.

"Hey," Brade said in my ear. "You coming or not?"

I twisted and looked over my shoulder, but saw only the back part of my cockpit—a cushioned wall affixed with an emergency blanket, flashlight, and medical kit.

"Alanik?" Brade asked. "There's something over here. Come tell me what you see."

"Coming," I said, hands trembling as I put them back on the controls. Scud. Scudscudscudscudscud. I felt alone. Small. I had nobody to talk to about this. Cobb and my friends were trillions of kilometers away, and even M-Bot was cut off from me until I returned to Starsight.

Dared I mention my vision to Brade? That had been no simple delver maze hologram. That had been from my *own memories*. Would she think I was crazy? Worse, would she think I was one of them? Was I seeing these things because some part of a delver had attached itself to *my soul*?

My controls went crazy as I reached the end of the tunnel. They said I had hit a patch of artificial gravity, and—even more strangely—had entered *atmosphere*. This ship barely had any wings, but it still deployed ailerons

for steering, and the atmospheric scoop powered on to help me make high-speed turns.

Just ahead, Brade had stopped her ship. “What do your sensors read?” she asked.

“Atmosphere,” I said. “Nitrogen-oxygen.”

Brade boosted forward a little, entering a large chamber that looked like it had a mossy floor.

“You see that moss?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, then let loose with her destructors. An explosion flared yellow-orange on the side of the chamber, blasting off flaming bits of metal. I felt the shock wave from it, my ship trembling.

“What?” I asked. “Why did you shoot?”

“Those blasts made fire that burned, instead of being smothered in the vacuum,” Brade said. “And I heard it. We’ve passed through an invisible shield and entered a pocket of atmosphere.”

Alarmingly, she popped the canopy on her ship.

“Brade!” I yelled.

“Relax,” she replied. “Pilots reported rooms like this near the heart.” She lowered her ship down, landing on the mossy surface. Then she climbed out and dropped to the ground.

I eased my ship into the chamber. After all the tricks we’d been through in this place, she was willing to just climb out? True, she had her helmet on, and her flight suit would double as a pressure suit, but still.

“The membrane should be here somewhere,” she said. “Come help me look.”

Nervous, I settled my ship down next to hers. I checked my console and was relieved to find that the pressure differential was minimal, so I popped my canopy. I unstrapped, trailing Brade’s form with my eyes as she poked along the ground. Finally I climbed out onto the ground, my feet scraping on the moss. It was real, no hologram.

I carefully picked my way over to Brade, who pulled off her helmet and looked around the dark chamber, lit by the floods from our fighters.

“Brade,” I said, hitting the microphone that would project my voice out of my helmet. “What if it’s a trap?”

“It’s not,” she said. “We’ve found the heart. This is the whole point of the maze.”



“We got here so quickly though. Only like what, three rooms?”

“It moves around,” Brade said, examining the cavern. “They must have simulated that when fabricating this maze.”

“I . . .” I stepped closer to her. “I’m not convinced this maze was fabricated.”

“The humans—”

“I know where the Superiority says they got it,” I said, cutting her off. “And most of me believes their story. But I don’t think the humans fabricated this. It’s too . . .” What? Eerie? Too hauntingly surreal?

*It shows me real hallucinations. It’s not a fabrication. Not completely.*

“I think it must be a corpse,” I said. “A delver’s corpse, repurposed to train on.”

Brade frowned at that. “I don’t know if they can even die, Alanik. You’re making assumptions.”

Maybe she was right. Still, I kept my helmet on as we scouted through the cavern, sticking close together. The moss on those rocks was alive, as best as I could tell from picking at it. What if it released, like, dangerous spores or something? I would have felt a lot more comfortable if Brade would put her helmet back on.

As we reached the far side of the room, I spotted something on the floor. A web of deep green, hidden behind a pile of rocks. I waved Brade forward and approached the patch. It looked like a spiderweb of green fibers, and was about a meter in diameter, circular.

“You see this?” I asked.

“A membrane,” she said. “Made of green fibers.”

So it wasn’t a hallucination. I knelt, poking at the fibers, then looked at Brade. She didn’t seem eager to push through it, and I found that neither was I.

“I was furious,” Brade finally said, speaking in a soft voice.

“Huh?” I asked.

“You asked earlier,” she said. “What it felt like to be taken from my parents when young. It made me angry.”

She knelt, yanking at the spiderweb of fibers, pulling it back and revealing a hole in the ground. It looked to be about two meters deep, and the light on my helmet showed a metal floor at the bottom.

“It seethed inside me for years,” Brade continued. “A molten pit, burning like destructor fire.” She looked back at me. “That’s when I realized the Superiority was right. I *was* dangerous. Very, *very* dangerous.”

She met my eyes for a moment, then pulled on her helmet again and activated the channel to call in to Flight Command. “We’ve found the heart,” she said. “Entering now.”

She lowered herself down through the opening. I hesitated only a moment, then climbed down after her. My heart began beating faster, but our headlights showed only a small, empty chamber with a very low ceiling.

“Well done,” Winzik’s voice said in our ears. “Alanik of the UrDail and Brade Shimabukuro, you are the seventh pair to reach this room in the training.”

“What happens now?” I asked. “I mean, if we were in a real delver maze? What would we find?”

“We don’t know what it will look like,” Winzik said. “Nobody has ever returned after entering the membrane. But in the event of a true delver emergency, you must detonate the weapon. The lives of millions may depend on it.”

The weapon. We’d been told several times that one existed, though we had been given no details on it. We were assured that if a real delver emergency happened, we’d each be given ships equipped with one of the weapons, which was apparently like some kind of bomb that we were supposed to detonate near the membrane room.

“Great,” Brade said to Flight Command. “Now that we’ve gotten here, I think we’re ready. Brade out.” She leaped up and pulled herself up from the room through the hole, entering the chamber with the moss.

I followed, turning off the line to Flight Command. “Ready?” I asked her. “Brade, we’ve only made it to the heart *once*. We need to run this mission many more times.”

“To what end?” she asked. “The rooms are starting to repeat; we’ve seen everything this test maze can show us. We’re as prepared as we’re going to be.”

I caught up to her. “I doubt that. There’s always room for more training.”

“And if this fake maze makes us grow complacent? The real thing will be unexpected. Insane, or at least beyond our kind of sanity. If we just run

through these same rooms, we'll get too comfortable with them. So the more we train, the worse off we could be."

Once we reached our ships, I hesitated, thinking of what she'd said earlier about being angry. Then, after a moment of indecision, I pulled off my helmet. I didn't want to risk my microphone picking up what I was going to say, just in case.

Brade had been about to haul herself onto her ship's wing, but stopped when she saw me. She cocked her head, then pulled off her helmet too. I put mine aside, then gestured for her to do the same.

"What?" she asked.

Again, I nearly told her. I nearly turned off my bracelet, revealed my true face. In this place of lies and shadows, I nearly exposed to her the truth. I wanted so badly to have someone to talk to, someone who might understand.

"What if there were a way to change things?" I said instead. "A way we could make it so humans didn't need to be treated like you are? To show the Superiority they're wrong about you?"

She cocked her head and drew her lips together in a dione sort of expression. "That's the thing," she said. "They *aren't* wrong."

"What was done to you was unnatural, Brade. You were *right* to feel angry about it."

She grabbed her helmet and put it on, then climbed up into her cockpit. I sighed, but did the same. So my helmet was back on when I caught what she said next.

"Flight Command," Brade said. "We've reached the center, so I'm going to test the weapon now."

"Affirmative," Winzik said.

Wait. *What?*

"Brade!" I said, looking across at her cockpit. "I'm not even strapped into my—"

She pushed a button on her console, and a flash burst from the center of her ship. It hit me like an invisible wave, connecting not with my body, but with my mind.

In that moment, I immediately knew the way home.

**I** *knew* the way *home*.

I saw it—the pathway to Detritus—as clearly as I could remember the way to the hidden cavern where I’d found M-Bot. As clearly as I remembered that day when my father had flown for the last time against the Krell.

It was burned into my brain. Like an arrow made from light. I knew, somehow, not just the direction—but the destination. My home. This weapon, the secret one created to fight the delvers, was not what I’d assumed it to be.

“Weapon test successful,” Brade said. “If this were a real delver, I am one hundred percent confident this would have diverted them to the human refuge of Detritus.”

I heard, in the background, cheers and congratulations. I heard Winzik telling the other government officials that their anti-delper system was operational, and their pilots perfectly trained. He ended with a simple, stunning conclusion. “If a delver *did* ever attack the Superiority, my program ensures that we will be able to send them to destroy the humans instead. We will fight the two greatest threats to the universe by turning them against one another!”

The terrible understanding loomed over me. I threw off my helmet and leaped out of my cockpit, crossing the spongy ground toward Brade’s ship. When I arrived, I found her lounging on the wing, her helmet off and beside her.

“You *knew* about this?” I demanded of her.

“Of course I knew,” she replied. “Winzik’s scientists used my mind to develop the weapon. We’ve always known that there was a connection between cytonics and the delvers. We cause them pain, Alanik. They hate

us, maybe even fear us. We tried for years to exploit this, and came to the logical conclusion. If we can't destroy delvers, we can at least divert them."

"That's not a good solution! At best, it delays a catastrophe! It doesn't stop one!"

"It can if we play this right," Brade said. "We *don't* need to defeat the delvers. We simply need to control them."

"This isn't controlling them!" I snapped. "A single barely tested blast that *might* divert them away? What happens when they come back? What happens *after* they destroy your target, then continue to rampage across the galaxy?"

I was growing so used to the way diones and Krell responded to outbursts like this that a part of me was surprised when Brade just smiled, instead of pulling back and chiding me for my aggression.

"You act as if Winzik hasn't thought about any of that," she said.

"Considering my experiences with him and his military tests, I think I'm allowed to question his foresight!"

"Don't worry, Alanik," Brade said. She nodded toward her ship. "Today's 'test' was a way to show off for the officials back on the *Weights and Measures*. This isn't the first time we've tested the weapon—we've been planning this for years. We know that we can handle a delver."

She slipped off her wing, her boots scraping the mossy rock beneath her as she landed. She stepped closer to me. "This training program and all of these pilots are an insurance policy. Their job will be to use diversionary bombs to shuffle a delver around between locations until the real weapon gets there."

"Which is?"

She pointed at herself. Then she pointed at me. "In joining these flights, you provided us with a gift. Another cytonic. We have so few. Winzik told me to befriend you, recruit you. So here we are."

Recruit me? This whole time, Brade had been trying to recruit *me*? Was that why she'd been warming up to me lately?

Scud, she was as bad at this as I was.

"This is *insane*, Brade," I said. "The humans tried to control the delvers, and look where it got them!"

"We've learned from their mistakes," Brade said. "If you are willing, I can show you things about your powers. Things you never *dreamed* were

possible. We *can* control the delvers.”

“Are you *sure*?” I asked. “Are you *really* sure?”

She hesitated, and I saw that she wasn’t, even though she made a dione gesture of assurance by raising her hand and tapping two of her fingers together.

The chinks in her armor were there. She wasn’t nearly as confident as she pretended.

“We should talk about this,” I said. “Not be so hasty.”

“Maybe,” Brade said. “Maybe there isn’t time, though.” Brade turned back to her ship. “The Superiority is losing its stranglehold on travel. Others are close to figuring out its technology. Something new is needed. Something to keep everyone in line, and prevent wars.”

The horror of it hit me. “The delvers. You’ll have them looming over everyone—a threat. ‘Obey, play along, or we’ll send one to your doorstep . . .’”

“Just think about the offer, Alanik.” Brade put on her helmet. “We’re pretty sure we can handle keeping a delver distracted when it’s in our realm. In the past, they’d sometimes spend years between attacks floating in space, doing whatever it is they do. So if our force can be ready when one approaches a populated planet, it should be safe enough—particularly with cytonics like us as a backup. Winzik can explain it better than I can. He’s a genius. Anyway, we should get back.”

She slid into her cockpit. I stood in stunned silence for a moment longer, trying to wrap my brain around everything she’d told me. Whatever they *said* they’d practiced, whatever assurances they *thought* they had, they were wrong. I’d felt the delvers. Winzik and his team were like children playing with an armed bomb.

But as I walked back to my ship, I had to admit that a small portion of me was tempted. How much did Brade know about my powers? What could she show me? I’d played along with joining the Superiority’s military to get access to hyperdrives. Could I play along with this offer to learn what Brade knew?

*Too far*, I thought as I climbed back into my ship. *No*. I wanted nothing to do with the delvers. Though it was unrealistic, I never wanted to feel their eyes on me again. I never wanted to feel their thoughts intruding on mine, making everything and everyone seem so insignificant.

Whatever Brade and Winzik were up to, I couldn't join it. I had to find a way to stop it.

"Brade," I said as we got back on the comms, "don't you care at all that they're planning to use this to destroy an entire planet of humans? Your people?"

She didn't respond immediately. And when she did, I thought I heard a hesitation to her. "They . . . they deserve it. It's what has to be."

Yes, there were obviously cracks in her confidence. But how could I exploit them?

The two of us flew out of the maze, then headed to join the rest of our flight. However, we got a call from the *Weights and Measures* before we arrived.

"You two," the official said, "Alanik of UrDail and the human. Report in early."

I felt an immediate surge of panic. Was this more of Winzik trying to recruit me, or was it about my spy drone? In the face of the overwhelming discoveries that Brade had dropped on me, I had almost forgotten about my plan and the little robot that was hiding back on the *Weights and Measures*.

I looked out into the stars. I didn't need coordinates to try to judge the direction to Detritus. I could *feel* it out there, the pathway burned into my head. It was fading, like the path to Starsight that Alanik had put in my head, but much more slowly. I felt I'd have this arrow for days at least.

She'd been weak, near death. That was why her coordinates had faded so quickly. This was a more powerful impression.

I could go. I could jump home, right now. I was free.

But M-Bot and Doomsbug were back at the embassy. No—I still had a mission here. It wasn't time to leave yet. Not quite.

*Winzik can't have discovered the drone*, I told myself, shoving down my earlier anxiety. *Why would they call us both back, in that case? Why would they call me back at all? If they suspected me, they'd start shooting, right?*

I then turned my ship toward the *Weights and Measures*, which seemed like a small rock compared to the dominating polyhedral boulder that was the delver maze. As soon as I drew close enough to the carrier, my wristband buzzed, indicating that I'd re-established communication with the drone.

*Status?* I sent to it, tapping on the bracelet.

*Have infiltrated engine room, it sent back. Am hovering in a corner. Good visibility. Algorithms determine a very low chance of discovery. Continue, or return to meeting point?*

*Seen anything interesting?*

*Not capable of answering that question. But my chronometer indicates I arrived after hyperjump occurred.*

I'd want it to stay in place at least until we hyperjumped back to Starsight. That would give me the best chance of capturing sensitive information.

*Remain, I sent.*

I landed behind Brade in the fighter bays, and handed off my ship to the maintenance crew. I caught up with her as she climbed down from her ship.

"Any idea what this is about?" I asked. "Is it about recruiting me?"

Brade gave a noncommittal swipe of her fingers, a dione gesture.

We were met by a guide drone, which led us away from the fighter bay, down an unfamiliar red-carpeted path through the *Weights and Measures*. Irrationally, I felt like I was being walked to a cell—right up until the moment when we stepped through a set of double doors and entered a party.

Krell and diones in official uniforms or robes stood about, sipping fancy drinks. A large screen on the far wall showed shots of training fighters, alternating with slides of text that explained the philosophy behind our training. From the little bits my translator read to me, it looked like the Department of Protective Services was making great efforts to prove how important their project was.

Indeed, I noted other pilots from other flights standing throughout the room, speaking with officials. I'd been called in to be used for propaganda purposes, it seemed. Soon, Winzik gestured me over to stand by him—though the drone instructed Brade to wait behind.

Winzik was in good spirits, judging by the excited way he waved the arms of his green exoskeleton. "Ah, here she is! The only one of her species on Starsight. And now she serves in my program. Proof that it has merit indeed!"

The two Krell he was speaking to looked me over. "Ah," one said. "Your people once served the humans, did they not? How do you feel at finally being invited to join the Superiority?"



“Honored,” I forced myself to say. Scud, did this have to happen today? Now that I wasn’t actively fighting, my worry about the spy drone was growing nearly unbearable.

“I’m more interested in your human, Winzik,” the other Krell said. “Has she killed anyone by accident?”

“My my, no! She’s *very* well trained. Let us focus on my project, Your Honors. A reasonable plan for protecting against the delvers, at long last!”

“That,” a voice said from over my shoulder, “and the Superiority’s first actively piloted space force in a hundred years. One composed entirely of lesser species, at that.”

I spun and found Cuna there behind me. Even in a room of diplomats and politicians, Cuna stood out—tall, with deep blue skin, shrouded in robes such a dark violet they were nearly black.

“It’s not completely made up of lesser species,” Winzik admitted. “We’ve got one dione. A draft, strangely.”

“Still, an incredible undertaking,” Cuna said. “That leaves me wondering at the Department of Protective Services . . . and its ambitions for this force it is training.”

I could practically *feel* the tension between Cuna and Winzik. The other officials did the Krell equivalent of clearing their throats—making a crossing gesture—before withdrawing. That left just me, Winzik, and Cuna.

The two didn’t speak. They only stared at each other. Finally, Winzik turned around without a word and responded to someone speaking nearby. The cheery Krell walked over and jumped right into that conversation, explaining enthusiastically about his plan to defend against the delvers.

*How much does Cuna know? I wondered. Cuna was the one to invite Alanik here, a cytonic. They must suspect what Winzik is doing, but how much can I trust either of them?*

“I don’t know what any of this means,” I said to Cuna. “But I’m not interested in your political games.”

“Unfortunately, Alanik, the game takes no care for your interest. It plays you either way.”

“Did you know about the weapon?” I asked. “Did you know its real purpose? To send the delvers out to attack other planets?”

“I suspected,” Cuna said. “Now I have confirmation. There are . . . things I must tell you, but we can’t talk here. I will send for you back on Starsight.

For once, kindly *respond* to me. There is little time remaining.”

They gave me one of their evil smiles—the ones that made me shiver all the way through. Hadn’t it been Cuna who told me that the humans had fallen because they tried to weaponize the delvers? What did they think about Winzik and the Superiority trying basically the same thing?

Cuna turned to leave, and I reached for them—intending to demand answers *now*. Unfortunately, I was interrupted by shouting from the side of the room.

“I will *not*,” Brade snapped, her voice carrying. “You shouldn’t want a picture with a monster anyway.” She threw her cup of something colorful at the wall, splashing liquid all over, then stalked out of the room.

Scud! I darted after her, leaving the party behind. Belatedly, the drone that had led us there followed.

I caught up to Brade at the first intersection, where she paused, obviously not knowing which way to go. Several guards nearby eyed us distrustfully—there seemed to be even more security in the hallways than usual, probably because of all the visiting dignitaries.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“I’m wrong,” she snapped. “And they’re all wrong. I’m not some freak to gawk at.”

I grimaced. Though I could understand the sentiment, she probably hadn’t done much to improve the reputation of humans among that crowd.

“If you’ll come this way,” the drone operator said. “I’ve been given permission to lead you to your transport room to wait for the rest of the pilots.”

It started off down the hallway and we followed, passing a few windows that looked out at the stars. At times, it was hard for me to remember we were on board a ship, silly as that sounded. The DDF didn’t have anything larger than a small troop transport. Ships of this size—with entire ballrooms in them—were completely outside my experience.

I hurried alongside Brade, searching for something to say. “I know of a place,” I whispered to her, “where nobody would look at you like a freak. Where nobody would stare.”

“Where?” she snapped. “Your homeworld? Alanik, I know about your people. Mine *conquered* them. I wouldn’t just be a freak there—I’d be hated.”

“No,” I said, taking her by the arm—stopping her in the empty hallway. There seemed to be fewer patrols in this section of the ship than there normally were. Some of the guards had been moved up by the ballroom. And our guide drone was pretty far ahead.

“Brade,” I whispered. “I can tell you have reservations about this plan.”

She didn’t respond, but she met my eyes.

“There are . . . things I can’t tell you right now,” I said. “But I promise you, I can take you somewhere you’ll be appreciated. Not hated, not feared. Celebrated. I’ll explain soon. I just want you to listen when I do, all right?”

Brade frowned in a very human way. She might have picked up some Krell and dione mannerisms, but she’d been raised—at least as a child—by human parents.

The guide drone called to us, and so I let go of Brade and we hurried to catch up. We passed the hallway leading to Engineering—there was still a guard posted at the intersection, unfortunately—and continued to our jump room.

I stewed for what felt like hours but was probably about half of one—then smelled a distinctive cinnamon scent. “Are you two well?” Vapor asked. “Flight Command said they’d called you back, but wouldn’t tell me why. To them, I don’t have any real authority.”

“We’re fine,” I said, glancing toward Brade—who had taken her customary seat in the last row, where she sat staring at the wall. “Winzik just wanted to show off some of his pilots.”

The kitsen and Morriumur entered a short time later. “Alanik!” Kauri said, flying the platform to me, “you reached the heart!”

“What was it like?” Hesho asked from his throne. “Bright, like a thousand sunrises experienced all at once? Dark, like the gloom of a cavern that has never seen the sky?”

“Neither,” I said. “It was an empty room, Hesho. They don’t know what’s at the center of a real maze, so they couldn’t imitate it.”

“How disappointing,” he said. “That’s not poetic at all.”

“I heard,” Morriumur said, “that the high minister of the Superiority was here today, *in person*. Did you see them?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I wouldn’t recognize them if I did.”

Aya, one of the kitsen gunners, launched into a story about how she’d caught a glimpse of the high minister when touring Starsight. Hesho looked

pointedly unimpressed—but, well, he *had* been a king, so maybe high ministers were boring to him.

I was content to let the others talk, settling down in my seat and tapping covertly on my bracelet. *Status?*

*Waiting and observing, the drone sent. There is movement of personnel. Based on dialogue, I believe we will soon hyperjump.*

Right. It was time, then. I just had to hope that the drone would be able to record something. I sank down into myself, pretended I was flying. I immediately saw the path home, but turned away from that. Not now. Not yet.

I tried to reach toward this ship, the *Weights and Measures*. I tried to “hear” what was being said on board . . . It shouldn’t work. There was no reason for them to use cytonic communication to talk to other places on board the ship. And yet, voices from Engineering popped into my head.

It felt like . . . someone was relaying them to me? Like someone was hearing them, then projecting them.

*All pilots are on board and personnel secured, Winzik’s voice said. Engineering, you may proceed with the hyperjump back to Starsight regional space.*

*Understood, an engineer said back. I could even hear the drone accent. Preparing for hyperjump.*

Near them. Near them was a *mind*. Not a person though, something else. It was relaying these words. Maybe . . . maybe I could help make certain the drone had something to record. My presence here on the ship had interfered before with the hyperjumps. Could I make that happen on purpose? Force the crew to swap hyperdrives?

I pressed softly against the mind I’d found. I heard a sharp cry.

*Hyperdrive malfunction, Engineering said. Bridge, we have another hyperdrive malfunction. It’s those cytonics on board. They’re creating an unconscious interference with the hyperdrives.*

*Try a replacement?* the bridge said.

*Loading one now. Can we do something about this? It causes so much paperwork . . .*

I snapped back to myself. Whatever they did worked, for we soon entered the nowhere again. Another scream. Another lurch as I was cast into

that place of darkness punctured by the delver eyes. As usual, they had turned from us, and were looking toward the sound of the scream.

Was this how the diversionary bomb worked? Superiority hyperdrives could distract the delvers, divert their attention. Perhaps the Superiority had advanced this technology to create the device that Brade had activated.

I studied the delvers—who, more and more, were looking like tunnels of white light.

A prickling sensation washed through me. I knew, without needing to look, that I'd been seen. One of the delvers, perhaps the same one as last time, wasn't distracted by the scream.

I turned and found it right beside me. I could feel its emotions. Hateful, dismissive, *angry*. Sensations washed through me, and I gasped. To the delver, life in my universe was nothing more than a bunch of angry gnats. Somehow, it knew I was more. It loomed over me, surrounding me, overwhelming me.

I was going to die. I was going to—

I slammed back into my seat on the *Weights and Measures*. Aya was still telling her story to a rapt audience.

I curled up on my seat, sweating, rattled. I'd never felt so small. So *alone*.

I trembled, trying to banish the unexpected emotion. I couldn't tell if it belonged to me or was a side effect of having seen that delver. But loneliness swallowed me.

It was even worse than when I'd been on Detritus, training. Living in my little cave, sleeping in a cockpit while the rest of my flight ate and laughed together. Then, at least, I'd had an enemy to fight. Then, I'd had the support and friendship of the others, even if I was forced to scavenge for food.

Here I sat in an enemy battleship, surrounded by people I'd been lying to. I thought of Hesho and Morriumur as my friends, but they would kill me in a heartbeat if they knew what I was.

*Status update*, the drone suddenly sent, the words tapping out on my wrist. *It is probable I have been detected*.

A set of warning alarms suddenly rang through the ship. Aya the kitsen cut off, and the rest of my flight stood up, shocked by the sudden sound.

*What?* I typed to the drone. *Explain!*

*Before I could exit the engine room, I tripped some sort of alarm, the drone sent. Multiple engineers search. I have not escaped into the hallway. I will soon be discovered.*

Scud! Though we'd tried to remove any identifying features on the drone parts, M-Bot had little doubt that the device—if detected—could be traced back to Alanik.

Scudscudscudscudscud.

*Orders?* the drone sent to me.

A plan popped into my mind. A terrible plan, but it was the only thing I could come up with while under so much pressure.

*Able to reach destructor pistol strapped to you?*

*Yes. Service arms can reach weapon.*

*Turn off safety, I sent. Remove tape. Hold pistol in front of you. Start pulling trigger.*

I expected an argument. M-Bot would have argued, but this drone wasn't him. It wasn't a true AI, and so could follow my instructions without thinking of the implications.

We felt the series of blasts, small though they were, from our room. The other pilots began to murmur nervously.

*Keep shooting*, I sent to the drone. *Avoid being destroyed*.

*Affirmative*.

The warning sirens turned frantic, and a voice piped over the PA, reverberating outside our jump room as well. "There are hostile forces in Engineering! Number unknown, but they're firing!"

Another set of blasts sounded from nearby. *Here we go*, I thought. "We're under attack!" I shouted to the other pilots. I leaped from my seat, swinging my pack onto my shoulder. "We need to go help!" I said, throwing open the door, and scrambled out into the hallway.

Though Morriumur sat stunned in their seat, Hesho needed no other confirmation. He shouted, "Kitsen! To arms!"

A swarm of furry little warriors on hoverplatforms zipped out into the hallway to join me.

"Wait!" Vapor's voice said from the room. "I'm sure that the local guards can handle this!"

I ignored her, barreling down the hallway. As I'd hoped, the solitary guard at the intersection to Engineering had taken cover by the wall, and was calling on her comm for backup. The Krell talked tough, but the truth was, this ship's crew had probably never been in combat before.

"I can help," I said to the guard. "But I'll need a gun."

Another series of blasts sounded from down the hallway. The Krell guard looked toward them, then back at me. "I can't . . . I mean . . ."

A part of me was really satisfied to see how her tough persona fell away once the shooting started. I waved my hand impatiently, and the guard took out her sidearm—a small destructor pistol—and handed it to me. Then she raised her larger rifle and nodded.

“Hesho, guard this hallway,” I said. “Don’t let anything suspicious escape through it!”

“Order confirmed!” Hesho said, and the kitsen platforms formed up like a wall behind us.

The Krell guard, to her credit, stood up and started down the hallway. She made a sharp cutting motion with her fingers—a kind of Krell version of *Here we go*. Then we passed beneath the large sign on the wall proclaiming that we’d entered Engineering.

I’d spent weeks trying to figure out a way to get down here, and I followed the guard with a rising sense of excitement. We turned down another hallway, and I was hit with the scent of lemons. Maybe a cleaning crew had been through recently? On the wall was a sign: NO NONESSENTIAL PERSONNEL ALLOWED. SECURITY CLEARANCE 1-B REQUIRED.

The blasts were coming from a door a little farther down, but the guard stopped and turned to me.

“You aren’t allowed in the room,” she told me. “It’s against clearance rules.”

“Is that more important than protecting the engineering crew?”

The guard actually gave it some thought, then said, “We should wait. Security details are up on deck four for special duty, but they should be here soon. All we need to do is make sure that whoever is in there doesn’t escape.”

I tried to go ahead, but the guard gave me a firm gesture of forbiddance, palm out, so I settled down by the wall, holding my pistol. I set my pack on the ground. My mind was racing. How did I get the drone out of this? Any second now, this hall would flood with security guards.

*Status?* I asked the drone, tapping covertly on my bracelet.

*Scientists hide,* the drone said. *None return fire.*

I scanned the hallway. *On my mark, fly out into hall. Fire two shots up high, and don’t hit anyone. Then drop gun.*

*Affirmative.*



*Backpack is by wall. Quickly hide inside after dropping gun.*

*Instructions understood.*

Right. I took a deep breath, then sent, *Go*.

Immediately, the drone—visible only as a shimmer in the air—floated out into the hallway. It fired the destructor overhead, sending the guard to the ground with a cry of fear.

“It’s coming for us!” I shouted. Then—right as the drone dropped the gun—I fired.

I’d done some time in the firing ranges, but had never thought that so much would ride on being able to hit a moving target with a pistol. My first three shots missed, but I managed to hit the gun right before it hit the ground.

The subsequent explosion was impressively large, sending out sparks and molten bits of metal. My shot detonated the pistol’s power supply. As the loud explosion washed over us, light flashing and blinding me, I dove for the Krell guard as if to shield her from the blast.

The two of us ended up in a pile on the floor. I blinked, trying to dispel the spots the bright flash had caused in my vision. Judging by how stunned the guard looked, she had suffered something similar.

Eventually, she shoved me off and scrambled to her feet. “What happened!”

“A drone,” I said, pointing toward a scorched portion of the carpet. “I shot it down.”

There was no sign of the drone itself, but the destroyed pistol had left scattered debris. Klaxons continued to go off, but the absence of further shots made the guard cautiously creep forward and inspect the burned ground.

“Get back to your transport room,” she said.

I was all too happy to do so, snatching up my backpack—which I was relieved to find heavy with the weight of the drone.

The guard peeked into the engine room to check on those inside, then thought to call to me, “Leave the gun!”

I dropped the pistol by the wall, then met up with Hesho right as a troop of six guards tromped past. One of them, a dione, hollered for us to get back into our room—but fortunately, we didn’t look too suspicious. Other pilots had gathered out in the hallway, confused by the warnings.

We scrambled into our seats, me clutching the backpack with my contraband drone inside. I peeked into it, and was shocked to see the drone. Shouldn't it be invisible?

I quickly zipped the pack up and tapped to it: *Engage lunch hologram. Version two, empty container.*

*Holographic unit offline, it tapped back. Explosion damaged system.*

Sweat trickled down the sides of my face. I was exposed. If guards demanded to inspect my bag . . .

Eventually, the warning klaxons turned off, and I felt the *Weights and Measures* dock at Starsight. My trepidation only grew. Could I find a way to stow the drone, for now, on the ship? Come back for it later?

There wasn't even a chance—we were ordered to make our way to the shuttle bay. I walked among a huddle of nervous pilots, noting the numerous guards in the hallways. I searched frantically for a way out, and remembered the second identity that M-Bot had programmed into my bracelet. The nondescript dione hologram.

Could I use that now, somehow? It seemed unlikely. A mysterious dione appearing in my place would be just as suspicious. So, I slunk along, sure each step of the way that the hammer was going to fall on me. I was so focused on that, I didn't notice the irregularity until I was almost at the shuttle bay.

Vapor. I couldn't smell her, and the other pilots didn't leave an opening for her like they normally did. I entered the docking bay and waited, trying to see if I could smell her.

A second later, she wafted across me. A sharp smell of . . . lemons. The same scent I'd smelled earlier, in the hallway outside of Engineering.

*She was there. In the hallway.* I pulled my pack closer.

"Vapor?" I asked.

"Come with me," her voice snapped. "*Now.*"

I winced, and—in a panic—reached out with my mind. Maybe I could hyperjump away, then find some way to come back for . . .

No, the directions to Detritus in my mind would end up with me floating out in orbit with no space suit, I was suddenly sure. I was trapped.

"Vapor," I said. "I—"

"*Now, Alanik.*"

I followed her scent through the room, which was actually easier than it might sound. Just as I'd worried, the guards were searching each pilot before they got onto their shuttles. An obvious precaution when a drone had been found spying here.

I pulled my pack closer, sweating as I trailed behind Vapor's sharp lemon scent. We approached a sleek-looking shuttle. The door opened.

Cuna, shrouded in dark robes, sat inside.

"Alanik," they said. "I believe we have some matters to discuss."

I glanced back at the rest of my flight. They were all getting in line to be searched. Morriumur had turned toward me, head cocked. Other guards were approaching me, one pointing.

I only had one option. I climbed into the shuttle with Cuna.

I clutched the pack to my chest as the door closed, and I was struck again by the overwhelming scent of lemons, which then shifted slowly to cinnamon. The two guards made it to the door, and one rapped on the shuttle window. Cuna pressed a button on a control panel, and the window descended.

“Minister Cuna?” one asked. “We’re supposed to search everyone.”

“I doubt those orders include heads of departments, soldier,” Cuna said, then hit the button again, closing the window. They gestured to the pilot.

The shuttle took off, then left the bay, flying toward the city proper. The moment we got outside of the *Weights and Measures*, a chipper voice spoke in my ear.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “How did it go? Did the drone work? I can sense its signal with you. You recovered it?”

I tapped out on my bracelet, *Not now*.

Cuna laced their fingers, then finally made a relieved gesture with two of them. “No call to return,” they said. “We’re in luck. My authority was enough to not be questioned.” Then they held out their hand, waving for me to surrender the pack.

I refused, pulling it closer.

“Vapor?” Cuna asked.

“It’s a drone,” said the familiar disembodied voice. “She was actually quite clever in how she retrieved it, as she shot off its weapon first. It will be days before anyone puts together that the remaining debris only includes pieces of a destructor pistol.”

I tried glaring at Vapor, which was hard because I didn’t exactly know where she was.

Cuna reached into their pocket and unfolded a sheet of paper. They held it out to me—and I narrowed my eyes, regarding it with suspicion. Finally, I

took one careful hand off my pack and accepted the paper.

“What does it say?” M-Bot asked. “Spensa, I’m having trouble following this conversation.”

I didn’t dare respond to him as I pulled off my pin and held it to the paper, getting a translation. It was . . . a list of communications? The short messages were dated in order, starting about a week ago.

*1001.17: Minister Cuna, while we respect your willingness to communicate—and acknowledge the relative strength of the Superiority—we cannot release private information about our messenger.*

*1001.23: After continued analysis of the brief messages sent to us via our emissary, Alanik, we of the Unity of UrDail are concerned for her safety. We have no plans to send further pilots to you.*

*1001.28: After continued suspicion concerning our messenger’s safety, we must cut off communication with you and the Superiority until such time as she returns to us.*

A cold chill ran down my spine. Cuna was in communication with the people on Alanik’s home planet. M-Bot and I had talked to them a few times after our first message, trying to play for time. It looked like they’d decided to step away from the problem entirely by ignoring us both.

“Your people are obviously stalling for you,” Cuna said. “I can see it clearly now. The UrDail never intended to join the Superiority, did they? You are a spy, sent here *exclusively* to steal hyperdrive technology.”

It took a moment for that to sink in.

*Cuna didn’t know I was human.*

They thought I was a spy for Alanik’s people. And scud, it sure did look like that, from Cuna’s perspective.

“What I can’t figure out,” Cuna said, “is why you would risk so much, considering that you already *obviously* know the secret. Clearly, your people know not just how to use a cytonic like you as a hyperdrive, but have created a secondary method. The same one we use.”

What? I opened my mouth to say I had no idea what Cuna was talking about, but then—for once in my life—thought before I spoke. For some reason, Cuna thought I already had the secret. So . . . why not play along? I might not have trained for this, but I was the one who was here. And my people needed me to be more than I’d been before.

“We couldn’t be sure that your methods were the same as ours,” I said. “We thought it worth the risk, particularly once we realized I would have a chance to infiltrate Superiority warships and secret projects.”

“You have been playing me all along,” Cuna said. “You now know about the weapon, the location of our training maze . . . the infighting among our departments. I would be impressed if I weren’t so angry.”

The wisest choice on my part seemed to be silence. Outside the window, we passed into a part of town with grand buildings, built with domes and large gardens. The government quarter? I was pretty sure that was where we were.

The shuttle landed beside a large rectangular building—one with few windows. More austere and grim than the others nearby.

Cuna held out their hand again toward my pack. I realized that I didn’t have much choice. I was unarmed and in their power. The only thing I had going for me was the fact that Cuna, remarkably, thought that *I knew what I was doing*.

I held up the pack. “I don’t need it anymore,” I said. “This conversation was confirmation enough.”

Cuna took it anyway, then fished out the drone and looked it over. “One of our own,” they said. “A modified cleaning drone? These are impressive security devices attached to it. I didn’t know your people had access to this kind of technology.”

Cuna looked toward the place where Vapor hung.

“That looks like figment technology,” Vapor said softly. “The kind that was forbidden us after the war. I’ve . . . seen old ships with those markings on them.”

Figment technology? *M-Bot*? I said nothing—though my heart skipped a beat when Cuna fished in the shuttle armrest for a cord, then connected the drone’s memory to a monitor on the back of the seat in front of us.

Trying to keep my voice calm, I spoke. “Drone, authorize playback of video starting from the moment I turned you on.”

“Confirmed,” the drone said.

“AI?” Cuna asked, baring their teeth in a look of shock.

“Not self-aware AI,” I said quickly. “Just a basic program that can follow orders.”

“Still! So dangerous.”

The screen turned on, displaying a view of me, wearing Alanik's face, in the stall of the bathroom.

"Fast forward," I said, "until two minutes before the hyperjump back to Starsight."

"Confirmed."

I waited, hands clenching, as the view changed to what had to be the engine room. It looked surprisingly like an office—no hyperdrive apparatus that I could spot, only chairs and monitors with diones in uniforms working them.

I eyed Cuna. Were they really just going to let this play? My heartbeat increased as audio sounded from the recording.

"All pilots are on board and personnel secured," Winzik's voice said over the room's PA. "Engineering, you may proceed with the hyperjump back to Starsight regional space."

"Understood," said one of the diones on the screen. A crimson, somewhat chubby individual. "Preparing for hyperjump."

They hit a button. Nothing happened. Elsewhere, at that moment, I had been straining to use my cytonic senses to interfere. It was surreal, watching what had been happening a few rooms over from where I'd been waiting.

Several of the diones looked agitated, speaking softly to one another. The chubby one hit the comm button. "Bridge, we have another hyperdrive malfunction. It's those cytonics on board. They're creating an unconscious interference with the hyperdrives."

Another dione got up and walked to the wall. They opened a hatch there and pulled something out. I leaned forward, my breath catching as I saw what they removed.

A metal cage, and inside of it, a bright yellow slug with blue spines.

A slug. Scud. SCUD.

It made so much sense. The entry about Doomslug's species on the datanet . . . it had said they were dangerous. That was a lie—the Superiority just wanted to make certain that if anyone saw one, they'd think it venomous and stay away.

*Report any sightings to authorities immediately.*

“Try a replacement?” a voice said on the recording.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said in my ear. “What is going on?”

“Loading one now. Can we do something about this? It causes so much paperwork.”

The diones removed the “hyperdrive” from a unit beside the wall. It was another slug, just like Doomslug. They slid the new one in and activated the hyperdrive. This time it worked.

I could almost hear that scream in my mind again. The high-pitched wail . . . The scream of the hyperdrive. Made by the creatures they were using to teleport.

“Drone, end video,” I whispered. I'd been expecting something horrific, like the surgically removed brains of cytonics. But . . . why should sapient beings be the only ones to have these powers? Didn't it make sense that some other creatures might develop a means of teleporting through the nowhere?

I thought of all the times I'd found Doomslug in places where I didn't expect her—all the times I'd noted in passing that I rarely saw her move, but that she always seemed to be able to go places quickly when I wasn't looking.

Then, one final understanding came crashing down on me. A seemingly simple phrase from the datanet entry. *Often found near species of fungi.*



M-Bot. When he had awoken, one of the only things he'd had in his data banks was an open table for cataloging local types of mushrooms. He'd fixated on it, knowing it was important, but not why.

His pilot had been looking for hyperdrive slugs.

"How?" I asked Cuna, trying to cover up my shock at all this. "How did you know I had a hyperdrive slug?"

"I followed you," Vapor said, making me jump. I *still* sometimes forgot she was around. "When you went out with Morriumur that day in the water garden."

Doomslug had met me at the door that day. Scud, she'd been acting so strange and lethargic since we'd arrived. Was that because Starsight's cytonic inhibitors interfered with her powers?

Cuna unplugged the drone, then placed it back into my pack. Then they laced their fingers, watching me with a thoughtful alien expression. "This causes problems," they said. "Beyond anything you likely understand. I had hopes . . ." They made a dismissive gesture, then opened the door to the shuttle. "Come."

"Where?" I said, suspicious.

"I want to show you exactly what the Superiority is, Alanik," Cuna said, taking my backpack and climbing out.

I didn't trust that dark expression, marked by a creepy smile. I waited behind, smelling cinnamon.

"You can trust them, Alanik," Vapor told me.

"Of course you'd say that," I replied. "But can I trust you?"

"I haven't told anyone what you really are, have I?" she whispered.

I looked sharply toward the empty space where she resided. Finally, feeling overwhelmed, I climbed out.

"Cuna," Vapor said loudly from behind me, "do you need me any longer?"

"No. You can return to your main mission."

"Affirmative," she said, and the shuttle door closed.

Cuna started toward the building without waiting to see if I'd follow. Why turn their back on me? What if I were dangerous? I hurried up beside them.

"I wasn't Vapor's main mission?" I asked, nodding back toward the shuttle as it took off.

“You were a stroke of luck,” Cuna said. “She’s actually there to watch Winzik.” Cuna reached the door, which had a window and a security guard inside. They nodded to Cuna, but then bared their teeth in a dione scowl at me.

“I bring this one with me, by my authority,” Cuna said.

“I’ll need to note it, Minister. It’s very unusual.”

Cuna waited for them to do some paperwork. I took the chance to tap a short message on my bracelet. *M-Bot. Still read me?*

“Yes,” he said in my ear. “But I’m very confused.”

*Doomslug is hyperdrive. If I die, get to Detritus. Tell them.*

“What?” M-Bot said. “Spensa, I can’t do that!”

*Heroes don’t choose their trials.*

“I can’t even fly myself, let alone hyperjump!”

*Slug is hyperdrive.*

“But . . .”

The guard finally opened the door. I stepped into the building after Cuna, and—as I’d worried from its fortresslike exterior—it had shielding to prevent spying, so M-Bot’s voice vanished.

The hallway inside was empty of people, and Cuna’s footwear clicked on the floor as we walked to a door marked OBSERVATION ROOM. Inside was a small chamber with a glass wall overlooking a larger room, two stories tall, with metal walls. I stepped up to the window, noting the markings on several of the walls.

*That strange language, I thought. The same one I saw in the delver maze—and in the tunnels back on Detritus.*

Cuna settled down in a chair near the glass window, placing my backpack beside the seat. I remained standing.

“You have the power to destroy us,” Cuna said softly. “Winzik worries about delvers, politicians argue about pockets of aggressive aliens, but I have always worried about a danger more nefarious. Our own shortsightedness.”

I frowned, looking at them.

“We couldn’t keep the secret of the hyperdrive forever,” Cuna said. “In truth, it shouldn’t have outlasted the human wars. We endured a dozen close calls when the secret started to leak. Our stranglehold on interstellar

communication was always enough, just barely, to keep the truth contained.”

“You won’t keep this secret much longer,” I said. “It’s *going* to get out.”

“I know,” Cuna said. “Haven’t you been listening?” They nodded toward the window.

A set of doors down below opened, and a pair of diones entered, pulling someone by the arms. I . . . I *recognized* them. It was Gul’zah the burl—the gorilla alien who had been kicked out of the pilot program way back after the test, then had been protesting against the Superiority.

“I heard that the Superiority made a deal with the protesters!” I said.

“Winzik was called in to handle the issue,” Cuna replied. “His department has been gaining too much authority. He claims to have negotiated a deal where the dissidents turned over their leader. I can’t track any longer how much of what he says is true and how much is false.”

*Those diones*, I thought, noting the brown-striped clothing they wore. *I saw some like them cleaning up after the protesters vanished.*

“This burl has been in custody since then,” Cuna said, nodding to Gul’zah. “Some fear that the incident on the *Weights and Measures* today was caused by revolutionaries. So the exile has been moved up. And I have little doubt that Winzik will seek other ways to use your attack on us to further his goals.”

Below, one of the dione technicians typed on a console at the side of the room. The center of the room shimmered, and then something appeared—a black sphere the size of a person’s head. It seemed to suck all light into it as it floated there. It was pure darkness. An absolute blackness that I knew intimately.

The nowhere. Somehow, they had opened up a hole into the nowhere.

The kitsen had mentioned to me that the Superiority—and the human empires as well—had mined acclivity stone from the nowhere. I knew they had portals into the place. But still, seeing that dark sphere affected me on a primal level. That was a darkness that should not exist, a darkness beyond the mere lack of light. A wrongness.

*They lived in there.*

I suspected what would come next, but was still horrified when it happened. The guards took the struggling prisoner and forced their face to

touch the dark sphere. The protester began to stretch, then was absorbed into the darkness.

The technician collapsed the sphere. As everyone left, I spun on Cuna. “Why?” I demanded. “Why show me this?”

“Because,” Cuna said, “before your stunt today, you were my best hope at stopping this abomination.”

“You seriously expect me to believe that a *Superiority official* cares what happens to ‘lesser species’?” I spat the words, perhaps too fervently. I should have been political, kept my emotions in check, tried to get Cuna to talk.

But I was mad. *Furious*. I’d just been forced to watch an exile, maybe even an execution. I was mad at myself for getting caught, frustrated to finally know the secret to hyperdrives—to be so close to bringing the secret back to my people—only to be *threatened* by Cuna. That was why they’d brought me here, of course. To warn me what awaited me if I didn’t obey.

Cuna stood up. I was short compared to average humans, so Cuna towered over me as they walked to the glass, then rested a blue hand against it. “You think of us as being of one mind,” they said. “Which is the exact flaw held by many in the Superiority itself. Presumption.

“You may choose not to believe it, Alanik, but my entire *purpose* has been to change the way my people view other species. Once the secret of hyperdrives escapes our grasp, we will need something new to keep us together. We won’t be able to rely on our monopoly on travel. We need to be able to offer something else.”

Cuna turned toward me and smiled. That same creepy, off-putting smile. This time it struck me, and I realized something.

Had I ever seen any other diones *try* to smile?

It wasn’t a dione expression. They pulled their lips tight into a line to express joy, and they bared their teeth to express dislike. They gestured with their hands sometimes, like the Krell. I couldn’t think of any of the others, Morriumur included, ever smiling.

“You smile,” I said.

“Isn’t this facial expression a sign of friendship among your people?” Cuna asked. “I’ve noticed you have similar expressions to humans. I’ve practiced for the day when I get to speak with them and offer a hand of peace. I thought the same expressions might work on you.”

They smiled again, and this time I saw something new in it. Not a creepiness, but an unfamiliarity. What I had interpreted as a sign of smugness had been an attempt to put me at ease. A failed attempt, but the only sign I could remember—in my entire time here—of a dione *trying* to use one of our expressions.

Saints and stars . . . I'd built my entire gut response to this person on the fact that they *couldn't smile right*.

"Winzik and I conceived the Delver Resistance Project together, but with very different motives," Cuna said. "He saw a way to get access to a true, actively piloted starfighter corps again. I saw something different. I saw a force of lesser species serving the Superiority—*protecting* it.

"Perhaps it is foolish imagining, but I saw in my mind's eye the day when a delver might come—and a person like you, or the kitsen, or some other species saved us. I saw a change in my people, a moment when they began to realize that some aggression is useful. That the different ways species act is a *strength* of our union, not a flaw in it. And so, I encouraged you to join us."

They waved at the room that had held the black portal. "The Superiority is deceptively weak. We exile that which doesn't match our ideal of nonaggression. We encourage species to be more and more like us before they can join, and there *are* good ideals among our people. Peace, prosperity for all. But at the cost of individuality? *That* we must find a way to change."

They rested their fingers on the window again. "We have grown complacent, timid. I fear that a little aggression, a little strife, might be exactly what we need. Or else . . . or else we will fall to the first wolf that sneaks past the gates."

I believed them. Scud, I *believed* Cuna was sincere. But could I trust my own assessment? The fact that I'd so grossly misread their expressions reinforced this idea. I was among *aliens*. They were people, with real love and emotions, but they also—by definition—wouldn't do things the same way humans did.

Who could I trust? Cuna, Vapor, Morriumur, Hesho? Did I know enough to trust any of them? It felt like a person could spend a lifetime studying other species and still get this sort of thing wrong. Indeed, Cuna's attempts at smiling were proof of that exact idea.

And still, I found myself reaching over and pushing back my sleeve. I undid the little latch on my bracelet that kept me from pushing the button accidentally.

Then—taking a deep breath—I deactivated my hologram.

Cuna's eyes bulged practically out of their head as they stared at me. Then they bared their teeth, shying back. "What?" they demanded. "What is this?"

"I was never Alanik," I said. "I took her place after she crashed on my planet." Then I stuck out my hand. "My name is Spensa. You said you were waiting to hold out your hand to a human, in peace. Well . . . here I am."

It might have been the craziest thing I'd ever done. Honestly, I'm not sure I could explain why I did it. I'd *just* realized that I couldn't necessarily trust my gut when it came to aliens—their habits, expressions, and mannerisms wouldn't match my expectations.

This was different though. This wasn't me reacting by instinct to something an alien did. This was a *choice*. If there was even a chance that Cuna was sincere, it could mean an end to the war. It could mean safety for my people.

I wasn't certain if this was what the heroes from Gran-Gran's stories would have done. But it was what *I* did. In that moment. Taking that risk.

Accepting that hope.

Cuna—though they leaned back at the same time—took my hand in theirs. I guessed that part of them reviled the idea of touching me. Still, they *did* force themselves to do it. Cuna might use terms like *lesser species*, but I believed that they were sincerely trying.

They looked at me closer, still holding on to my hand. "How? I don't understand."

"Holograms," I said. "A portable one in my bracelet."

"We don't have technology to create a projector so small!" Cuna said. "But it was rumored that . . . that the humans did, during the first war. During their alliance with the figments. Amazing. The communications from Alanik's home planet . . . Do they know about you?"

“I told them, but I don’t know that they believe me. I’ve mostly been stalling them.”

“*Amazing*,” Cuna repeated. “You mustn’t show anyone else! It could be a disaster.” They pulled their hand back and—it seemed unconsciously—wiped it on their robes. I tried not to be offended.

“You are from the shell planet?” Cuna asked. “With the defensive platforms?”

“Detritus,” I said. “Yeah.”

“I fought for you until I was hoarse,” Cuna said. “In the closed senate meetings, when there were arguments for extermination. I didn’t believe . . . You’re standing here, *talking* to me? Amazing! You’ve been on Starsight for weeks! Have you . . . um, have you . . . killed anyone? By accident, I mean?”

“No,” I said. “We’re really not like that. Mostly, I’ve spent my time here trying to figure out which of the seventeen restrooms I’m supposed to use. Do you know how confusing that can be without some instructions?”

Cuna drew their lips to a line. I smiled back.

They walked around me. “Truly spectacular. We have watched you all these years, but know so little. The interference those platforms cause, you see. Still . . . we blasted you into what was practically a stone age, and less than a century later you already have hyperdrives again. I’m not sure whether to be impressed or intimidated.”

“Right now, let’s call it a draw,” I said. I touched my bracelet, turning my hologram back on so I looked like Alanik again. “Cuna, Winzik is crazier than you think. Brade told me some of his plans—they’re trying to recruit Alanik to join some kind of secret cytonic group they have. They think they can control the delvers.”

“Surely you exaggerate,” Cuna said. “The program we’ve developed uses a weapon to distract delvers. Our analysis proves that if they go too long in our realm without consuming a planet, they eventually fade. What we will try to do is not so much control them as keep them distracted from population centers long enough that they leave us.”

“Yeah, well, there’s more,” I said. “You’re not the only one worried about the Superiority losing control once everyone knows about hyperdrive slugs. Winzik plans to use the threat of a delver attack to keep everyone in line.”



Cuna bared their teeth. “If this is true,” they said, “then I have a great deal more work to do. But you needn’t worry. Our program is just in the beginning stages. I will search for the truth, and move to counter Winzik’s political aspirations. He is not so powerful yet that he cannot be stopped.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do to get the ‘human scourge’ to back down.”

“I can’t let you take that drone.”

“At least let me take the sensor unit I installed,” I said. “My ship needs that.” I looked to Cuna. “Please, let me go, Cuna. I’ll fly back to Detritus and persuade my people that someone among the Krell is willing to talk about peace. I think they’ll listen. What would happen to Winzik’s power if suddenly his department wasn’t needed? What if the human scourge became an ally to the Superiority, instead of an enemy?”

“There is a long way to go for that to happen,” Cuna said. “But . . . yes, I can imagine it. A deal then, between you and me.” Cuna hesitated, then put their hand out toward me again. “Or, a deal to perhaps make a deal.”

I took it. Then I pulled my lips to a line. Cuna, in turn, smiled. Well, it was kind of a smile. A worthy effort, anyway.

I retrieved the sensor and hologram unit I’d attached to the drone and put them in my flight suit pockets, but left the drone itself in the backpack. Cuna led me to the door, and I tried not to think about the poor alien who had been exiled. I couldn’t let myself feel responsible for what had happened to them. I just had to do what I could.

What would happen if we really did make peace? Would that mean no more need for starfighters? I found that difficult to believe—the delvers were still out there, right? There would be battles. There were always battles.

It still felt a little odd to have *me*, of all people, be the one who took the first steps toward peace.

“I can take you by shuttle to your embassy,” Cuna said, walking me through the security door to the open air. “Then I can fill out the proper paperwork, indicating that ‘Alanik’ is returning to her people. I don’t know how we’ll make this work after that, but . . .”

Cuna trailed off as a military shuttle—it looked like the same one we’d flown there in—zipped down out of the air and landed with a hasty thump

right in the middle of the grass, ignoring the farther launchpad. The door slammed open, but no one was inside.

I immediately smelled cinnamon.

“Hurry!” Vapor’s voice said. “Alanik, we’ve been mobilized.”

“What?” I demanded. “Mobilized how?”

“Our flight is being sent into battle. I think a delver has been spotted.”

Our shuttle raced through the sky above Starsight, flying at an emergency altitude beneath the rest of the traffic.

“Vapor,” I said, “I don’t know if this is relevant to me any longer.”

“The possible appearance of a galaxy-wide threat isn’t relevant?” she asked.

“Do we *know* that is what happened?” I asked.

“Here, watch,” Vapor said, smelling floral at the moment.

She activated the monitor on the back of the seat in front of us. It played the emergency message—one sent by Winzik himself. “Pilots,” he said, using the most firm of hand gestures—both hands made as fists. “An enemy threatens Starsight. This is *not* a drill. I realize your training has been brief, but the need is dire. Report to the *Weights and Measures* for immediate deployment.”

“He doesn’t say it’s a delver,” I said. “It smells of politics.”

“Actually, that’s what I’m afraid of,” Vapor said.

“Listen,” I said. “Vapor, I showed myself to Cuna. My real self. The two of us decided to find a way to make peace between our peoples. I think that might be more important than whatever is happening here with Winzik.”

Vapor’s scent changed to something more akin to onions. “We’re already at peace with your people. Why would you and Cuna have to agree to that?”

“My *real* people. You said you know what I am. A . . . a human.”

“Yes,” Vapor said. “I put it together. Your planet, ReDawn. You’ve been hiding a human enclave there, haven’t you? They never really evacuated, but remained hidden among you. *That’s* why you never joined the Superiority. You’ve been worried we’d find out about the humans.”

*Oooooohhhh*, I thought. That was actually a reasonable guess. Utterly wrong, but more reasonable than the truth was, in many ways.

“I wondered why you used so many human expressions and mannerisms,” Vapor continued. “More than I thought was natural for your people’s supposed past. And your scent . . . you’re part human, aren’t you, Alanik? A species mix? That explains your cytonics. Humans always were very talented in that regard.”

“The reality is . . . a little less complicated than you think,” I said to Vapor. “Ask Cuna. But Vapor, I need to get back to my ship.”

“Alanik,” Vapor said, her scent going to something more like rain. “I need you right now. I’ve been assigned to watch Winzik, and I don’t think even Cuna is aware of how ambitious he is. You’re the best pilot I have, and I need you to be ready to join me. In case.”

“. . . In case what?”

“In case this isn’t about a delver. Let’s just say there are elements in the government who are *very* worried about Winzik’s growing power—and his access to pilots who don’t share core Superiority values.”

Again, I was caught in the middle of something I barely understood. *She’s worried about a coup, isn’t she? That’s why she was assigned to become a pilot—to make sure Winzik isn’t trying to seize control of the Superiority.*

Where did that leave me? I had the secret. I needed to get home with it. Nothing else mattered, did it?

I used my bracelet to open a communication to M-Bot, who should be able to hear me now that I was out of the governmental building. My reply was a quiet sound transferred via my earpiece.

*Click. Clickclickclickclick . . .*

Our shuttle tore along the docks, joining others that were swarming the *Weights and Measures*. We disembarked to an organized chaos as excited pilots climbed from shuttles and were ushered through the hallways.

I found Hesho and the kitsen hovering over the heads of the other pilots, looking agitated. “Hey!” I called to them as I passed.

Hesho zoomed in near my head. “Alanik,” he said. “What *is* this?”

“You know as much as I do,” I said, then bit off what I was going to say next. That was a lie. I knew *way* more than Hesho did. I always had.

Well, for the moment I agreed with Vapor. I needed to at least find out what Winzik was planning, as it might be relevant to the future of my people. We fell in with the other pilots. The other flights had lost a few

people in training, so we were maybe forty-five instead of our initial fifty-two.

In their excitement, it seemed like far more. The guide drones led us out of the shuttle hangar. We weren't taken to our normal jump rooms, but directly to the hangar with our fighters—which were quickly being prepped by ground crews.

Vapor swore softly. With our starfighters being prepped like this, it seemed increasingly likely that Winzik was going to use them against Starsight itself. Had I really gotten caught in the middle of a coup?

Winzik himself stepped onto a mobile ladder for climbing atop starfighters, and held up his arms to hush the group of chattering pilots.

"You are no doubt frightened," Winzik called, his voice amplified over the ship's speaker system. "And confused. You heard of the attack on the *Weights and Measures* earlier today. Well, we've analyzed the debris from that attack. And we found a destroyed weapon that was *human* in origin."

The chamber grew profoundly silent.

*Oh no*, I thought.

"We have evidence," Winzik said, "that the human threat is much greater than the high minister wishes to admit. Likely there are dozens of spy drones infiltrating Starsight. This is proof that the human scourge has begun to escape from one of its prisons. It is a festering hive of humanity that we were never given the proper authority or resources to suppress.

"Today, we will fix that. In ten minutes, this ship will hyperjump to the human planet Detritus. I want you all to be ready in your cockpits, prepared to launch the moment we arrive. Your job will be to destroy their forces. This should prove to be an excellent display of why the Superiority needs a more active and well-trained defense force."

It was strange to see him speaking so forcefully, with curt gestures, not even a single "my, my" or stutter. As he sent the pilots to suit up, I began to understand the depth of his plotting. He had probably been building to this all along. A display of strength, using his personal space force to annihilate the "human scourge" and cement his importance.

This was what I'd feared from the beginning. I'd been training a force that would be used against my own people. I needed to find a way to stop this—to make good on the peace that Cuna and I thought we could bring.

“Excellent,” Hesho said from beside me. “Finally, they decide to do something about those humans. This is a momentous day, Captain Alanik. Today we get vengeance against those who wronged us!”

“I . . .” What should I do? I couldn’t tell him. Could I?

I lost my chance as the kitsen swooped off toward their ship. I spun around, looking for the rest of my flight. Where was Brade? I needed to talk to her.

I found Morriumur standing beside their ship, holding their helmet. Teeth bared slightly.

“Have you seen Brade?” I asked.

Morriumur shook their head.

Scud. Where was she?

“Alanik?” Morriumur asked. “Are you excited? I’m worried. Everyone looks so eager to get to their ships, but . . . this wasn’t why we trained, was it? We were supposed to stop the delvers, not go into ship-to-ship combat against experienced pilots. I need more time. I’m not ready for dogfighting . . .”

I finally spotted Brade crossing the hangar, helmet already on, the black sunshield down. I ran over and intercepted her as she reached her ship and started to climb up the ladder. She tried to ignore me, but I grabbed her arm.

“Brade,” I said. “They’re going to be sending us against *your own people*.”

“So?” she hissed, the sunshield preventing me from seeing her eyes.

“Don’t you care?” I demanded. “This is the last chance humans have at freedom. How can you help destroy it?”

“They . . . they’re wild humans. Dangerous.”

“Humans aren’t what the Superiority says,” I said. “I can tell that’s true after just a short time knowing you. If you join in this, you’re perpetuating a lie.”

“It . . . it will make life better for the rest of us,” she said. “If people aren’t worried about a human empire suddenly jumping out of the shadows and attacking again, then maybe the rest of us can build something worthwhile in the Superiority.”

“Can’t you hear how selfish that is? You’d sacrifice hundreds of thousands of human lives so that *maybe* you can live a little better?”

“What do you know about it?” Brade snapped. “You can’t *possibly* understand how it feels to make a decision like this.”

*I can’t, can I?* I pulled her down from the ladder. She let me do it, moving limply as if her confidence had been replaced with uncertainty. In the shadow of the wing of her ship—sheltered, at least a little, from everyone else—I did it again. I turned off my hologram.

“I know *exactly* how it feels,” I hissed at Brade. “Trust me.”

She froze, my image reflecting back at me in the surface of her sunshield as I put my hologram back up.

“I came from Detritus expecting to find only enemies and monsters,” I whispered to her. “I found you instead. Hesho, and Morriumur, and *all of you*. I can’t conceive how difficult it was for you growing up, but I *do* know what it feels like to be hated for something you never did. And let me tell you, destroying Detritus isn’t going to help. It’s just going to further convince the Superiority that they were always right about us.

“You want to change this? You want to try to fix this? Come with me back to Detritus. Tell us what you know about the Superiority and about Winzik. Help us figure out a way to prove to the people of the Superiority that we’re no threat. Winzik wins only as long as he can convince everyone that we really are an enemy they have no choice but to destroy.”

Brade hadn’t moved. She just stood there, her eyes hidden. Finally, she put her hand up to the side of her helmet, hitting the button that pulled the visor up.

Then she pulled her lips back and showed the front of her teeth—an alien expression—and gestured sharply.

“Human!” she screamed. “I’ve found the human spy!”

Brade scrambled away from me, screaming—as if she hadn’t heard a single word of my impassioned plea.

“Human! Alanik is secretly a *human*!”

I stepped toward her, a piece of my mind refusing to admit what was happening. Surely she’d believe, if I showed her. Surely she’d accept the *reality* about her heritage, not the lies that she’d been told.

I’d gambled on revealing myself to Cuna, and that had worked. How could it backfire so completely when trying to talk to one of my own kind?

Scud. *Scud!*

I scrambled away, ducking past a confused Morriumur and skidding up to my ship. The ground crew member there—a creature with insectile features—tried to bar my way, but I shoved them aside and scrambled up to my cockpit. I pulled my helmet off the seat and slid down into place, hitting the button that closed the canopy.

I was saved by the fact that everyone was so excited about getting ready to go into battle. The general clamor of people shouting instructions was accompanied by the thumps of last-minute supply ships landing in the hangar. The noise prevented most of them from hearing Brade.

She, however, ran right for Winzik. So my time was tight. I powered on my boosters and flipped on the acclivity ring, praying that there wasn’t some kind of remote kill switch for these starfighters. I briefly heard alarms going off as I hit the boosters and roared across the floor of the hangar, shooting my destructors at the invisible air shield that kept out the vacuum.

The blast went right through, indicating the shield was still open for ship passage. I soared out into space and immediately ducked in close to the docks, to give me cover if the *Weights and Measures* started firing at me.

“M-Bot!” I shouted.

*Click. Clickclickclick . . .*



Scud. I swerved my ship along the docks, but my proximity sensor showed the *Weights and Measures* belching out dozens of fighters on my tail.

I soared in close to Starsight's shield, the bubble of air that protected the city. I didn't have any idea what kind of defenses the place might have—surely at the very least there would be gun emplacements along the rim. Maybe even that entire air shield could be configured to not let ships in or out.

Winzik worked quickly. I already saw ships diverting inside, moving toward the rim—and toward me.

"M-Bot!" I said. "I'm not sure if I can get to you!"

I got only clicking in return. I couldn't just *leave* him. I had to . . .

I knew the truth. I didn't have *time* to get to him. The knowledge I had inside me—the secret to Superiority hyperdrives, the power I had to teleport myself—was far too important to risk. I had to get back to Detritus, and I had to warn them about the impending attack.

This wasn't just about me or him, or even Doomslug—vital though her kind were. I fought with myself for a moment, watching all those ships—hundreds of them—swarm toward me. Then I turned my control sphere and hit my boosters, heading deeper out into space.

I needed to do Gran-Gran's exercise. As my acceleration increased—my back pressing into my seat—I imagined myself soaring. Among the stars. The singing stars, who serenaded me with their secrets . . .

"Spensa?" M-Bot's voice. "Spensa, I'm back. What is happening?"

I could *feel* it. That glowing arrow pointing the way home. The one embedded into my brain by the strange weapon. But I didn't know for certain if I could use my powers without M-Bot. Did I need some of the mechanical parts in his ship?

"Spensa!" M-Bot said. "I've been trying to change my programming, but it's hard. What are you doing? Where are you going?"

The other fighters were gaining on me. But I saw in front of me a roadway of light . . .

"Spensa?" M-Bot said softly. "Don't leave me."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my heart wrenching. "I'll come back. I promise."

Then I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to enter the nowhere. It worked.

This time, I didn't have the protection of Superiority technology. Delves loomed in the darkness, their terrible eyes locking onto me. I screamed beneath the scorn I felt from them, but then that seemed to fade as a single delver drew close. It surrounded me in that place between moments. Like a shadow blocking off the attention of all others.

A single hateful entity. I felt a torrent of emotions from it, omnipresent, smothering. It detested the sounds we made, the way we invaded its realm. People were like a persistent ringing tone constantly in the back of your mind, driving you to madness.

It drew so close that as—thankfully—I left the nowhere, I felt it try to follow. It tried to slip through to the place where we lived. The place where it could find all of its annoyances and smother them.

I came out of the nowhere screaming, alone, feeling like I'd barely slammed the door closed on a monster that had been chasing me. I had to physically fight against my trembling hands as I turned my ship.

Then I saw one of the most blessed sights of my entire life. Detritus, glowing in the sunlight, a planet surrounded by radiant metal shells. I was *home*.

I approached the planet's shells at a quick speed. The Superiority battleships still hung a moderate distance away, but I didn't see any dogfighting right now.

Unfortunately, as I drew close, I realized that without M-Bot to guide me I'd need a flight course from Command to get through the defensive shells. I scrambled to input the DDF communication codes and tune the radio to the proper channel.

"Hello?" I said. "Hello, anyone? Please acknowledge. This is Skyward Ten, callsign: Spin. I'm in a stolen ship. Um, please don't shoot me down."

They didn't respond immediately—though I wasn't surprised. I imagined that the soldier monitoring communications would immediately call their duty officer, instead of engaging the mysterious voice of the teleporting teenage pilot. They must have called a member of my team to confirm it was me though, because the voice that finally responded was familiar.

"Spensa?" Kimmalyn's lightly accented voice said. "Is that really you?"

"Hey, Quirk," I said, closing my eyes, savoring that voice. I'd missed my friends even more than I'd realized. "You have *no idea* how good it is to hear someone speaking English without a translator."

“Saints above! Your grandmother said she was confident you were alive, but . . . Spin, you’re really back?”

“Yeah,” I said, opening my eyes. My proximity sensors suddenly flashed a warning, though I had to zoom them out to see what had happened. A new ship had appeared out of the nowhere, popping into existence near where I’d come in a few minutes earlier. It had a familiar shape, long and dangerous, with numerous hangar bays for launching fighters.

The *Weights and Measures*.

“Don’t throw any parties yet, Quirk,” I said. “Get Cobb for me ASAP. I’m back, and my mission was a partial success . . . but I’ve brought company.”

# PART FIVE

I landed my stolen ship in a starfighter dock on Platform Prime, then popped my canopy. I'd turned off my hologram, and it felt odd to see my hands with their natural skin tone.

And this place. Had these walls always looked so bleak? Everything on Starsight had been ornamented with color. Had this air always smelled so stale? I found myself missing the faint scent of trees and soil, or even the hint of cinnamon from Vapor's presence.

Kimmalyn met me at the cockpit, grinning like a fool as she climbed up the ladder, then grabbed my helmeted head in an embrace. She smiled, and I found the expression strange. Aggressive.

Saints and stars. I hadn't been away *that* long. But as I stood up and embraced Kimmalyn, I felt a lingering sense of disconnect. The feeling that everything in this universe was a painful noise. A remnant of the emotions the delver had forced upon me.

I tried *so hard* to banish that feeling. Hugging a friend should have been the most relaxing thing I'd felt in weeks. Yet a part of me writhed at it. Not because of Kimmalyn, but because of me. I imagined that she was hugging some kind of strange creature, like an alien grub, instead of a person. Did she know . . . what I was?

Did I even know that?

"Oh, the Saint be praised," Kimmalyn said, pulling back. "Spin, I can't believe it's really you."

"Jorgen?" I asked.

"He's down below, planetside, on leave. I haven't seen him in a few days. Something about needing R&R?"

Well, it happened to the best of us. I'd just been really hoping to see him. Maybe . . . maybe he could knock me out of this strange funk I was feeling.

“What . . . ,” Kimmalyn said. “I mean, Jorgen explained he sent you on a mission. You really did it? You stole one of their hyperdrives? What about M-Bot?”

My heart felt like it would rend in two. “I—”

The klaxon alerts went off, blaring about an imminent attack. We both looked at the lights, listening as the intercom called all on-duty fighters to battle.

“I’ll explain,” I promised my friend. “I’ll try to, at least. After . . .”

“Yeah,” Kimmalyn said. She gave me another quick hug—I was still standing in my cockpit, she on the ladder. Then she rushed down it and ran for her ship. My instincts fought for me to sit back down and fly into the fight, but Cobb had been firm. I was to come and report first.

I climbed down and met Duane, of the ground crew. He gave me a grin and a thumbs-up, then slapped me on the back for my heroic return. I looked at him, befuddled, trying to read the emotions on his face—which suddenly seemed strange and bizarre. I understood his expressions as if on a time delay. Like I had to wait for an interpreter to translate them for me. Scud, what was *wrong* with me?

*You’re just tired*, I told myself. *You’ve been pushing yourself hard for two weeks—all while living as someone else*. Indeed, I was hit with a wave of exhaustion as I opened the door to walk into the hallway, but stopped and gave the unnamed Superiority fighter a fond look. She was no M-Bot, but she’d served me well. Would I ever fly her again? Probably not. She’d be torn apart and analyzed; access to an undamaged Krell fighter was a unique privilege for the DDF.

In the sterile, too-metallic hallway, I found a pair of men from the infantry waiting for me. They offered an escort to help me find the way to Cobb, but I couldn’t help but be reminded of the guards and guidance drones who’d accompanied me aboard the *Weights and Measures*. It wasn’t that the DDF didn’t trust me. It was just that the enemy was known to be able to affect the minds of people, particularly cytonics.

So . . . well, I guess they probably *didn’t* trust me. Not entirely. It wasn’t exactly the celebratory welcome home that I’d been anticipating.

The men led me to a command chamber with a large viewscreen on the wall and several dozen small computer stations underneath, where members of Flight Command monitored individual flights and kept tabs on the

enemy. They'd been busy while I was gone; the whole operation looked more smooth—with far fewer exposed panels—than I remembered.

Several junior admirals were directing the battle from command positions. Cobb stood behind them at the back of the room, looking distinguished in his white uniform, his silvery mustache bristling from his upper lip. They'd given him an imposing admiral's throne that overlooked everything. He used the seat to hold several stacks of paper, and the armrest for his coffee as he inspected reports and muttered to himself.

"Nightshade?" he asked as the guards marched me up. "What the hell have you done here? Wasn't the mission Jorgen sent you on to be a *stealth* mission? You look like you've damn near brought the entire Superiority down on us."

For some reason, hearing Cobb swear at me was the most comforting thing that could have happened to me right then. I let out a soft sigh. My entire universe was turning upside down, but Cobb was as constant as a star. An angry, surly star that drank too much coffee.

"Sorry, Cobb," I said. "I got involved in Superiority politics and . . . well, I don't think I'm entirely to blame for this attack, but my actions did seem to provide some excuses for them to come here."

"You should have come back sooner."

"I couldn't. My powers . . . I'm learning, but . . . I mean, *you* try to learn how to teleport using your brain. It's not as easy as it sounds."

"Sounds scudding hard."

"That's my point."

He grunted. "And the mission? The one you two made up, without proper authorization?"

"It worked. I pretended to be that alien who crashed here—I used M-Bot's holograms to pull it off—and lived among the Superiority long enough to figure out the secret of their hyperdrives." I grimaced. "I . . . might have screwed things up here and there."

"Well, you wouldn't be you if you didn't make my life more difficult at every turn, Spin." He nodded to the guards, and they withdrew. This conversation had in part been a test—and I'd passed it. Cobb was reasonably sure that I wasn't an impostor.

Cobb took a sip of his coffee and waved me closer. "What's really going on out there?"

“The Superiority has a bunch of factions. I didn’t learn much; it’s kind of over my head. But a military faction is reaching for power, and they’re going to try to exterminate us to bolster their credibility. Getting rid of the ‘human scourge’ as a way of proving themselves.”

On the screen at the front—which held an abstract battle map with dots of light representing ships—the *Weights and Measures* was deploying flights of fighters. It looked like several hundred drones of the normal style we fought. And fifty other ships, glowing brighter than the rest.

“Piloted ships,” Cobb said. “Enemy aces. Fifty of them.”

“They’re not aces,” I said. “But they are piloted ships. The Superiority has been preparing a group of real pilots to fight us. I . . . um, trained some of them.”

Cobb’s cup stopped halfway to his lips. “You really managed to join their space force and train with them?”

“Er, yes. Sir.”

“Damn. And that ship you stole? It has a hyperdrive?”

“No. But I know the secret. You know that yellow slug pet I have? The one I found in M-Bot’s cave? *Those* are what the Superiority uses to hyperjump. We need to send an expedition into the caverns on Detritus and see if we can catch any others.”

“I’ll put several teams on it immediately. Assuming we survive this battle. Any other bombs you want to drop on me?”

“I . . . um, revealed myself to one of the highest functionaries in the Superiority government, and we got along pretty well. I think we might be able to leverage this *other* faction in the government into making peace with us. Uh, assuming we survive the aforementioned battle.”

“And your ship? The one with the annoying attitude.”

I felt a spike of shame inside me. “I . . . left him behind, sir. And Doomslug. I was being chased by enemies, and they were getting close and —”

“It’s all right, soldier,” Cobb said. “You’re back, which is more than we had any right to expect.” He turned his eyes toward the screen and the growing flood of little blips of light. “I want you in a debriefing room with a recorder, telling us everything you can remember about their military capacities. I’ll stay here and do what I can to survive this invasion. Scud, that’s a lot of fighters.”



“Cobb,” I said, stepping closer. “Those aren’t bloodthirsty monsters out there; they’re just people. Normal people, with lives, and loves, and families.”

“And what did you *think* we’ve been fighting against all these years?” Cobb asked.

“I . . .” I didn’t know. Red-eyed, faceless creatures. Relentless destroyers. Not far from how they saw humans.

“That’s what war is,” Cobb told me. “A bunch of sorry, desperate fools on both sides, just trying to stay alive. That’s the part that those stories you love leave out, isn’t it? It’s always more convenient when you can fight a dragon. Something you don’t have to worry you’ll start caring about.”

“But—”

He took me by the arm, then moved some papers and gently steered me to sit in his chair. He didn’t banish me immediately to that debriefing. Perhaps he wanted me around to answer questions.

I sagged in the seat, watching as he stepped forward to take command. He was far better at that than one might assume. He didn’t try to do it all himself. He let the other admirals—ones he’d handpicked for their combat sense—lead the individual segments of the battle. He only intruded when he felt he needed to. Mostly he limped around the room, sipping his coffee and offering pointers here and there.

I watched the swarm of ships approach one another. I tried to sink farther down into my seat as I watched. Red and blue blips on a screen—but some of those blips were people I loved dearly. People on *both sides*. Was Morriumur out there, terrified but determined? Hesho and the kitsen? Would Kimmalyn shoot them down?

This wasn’t right. This *couldn’t* happen. And . . . it was also wrong. Not just wrong morally, wrong tactically. I stared up at the battle maps, and the Superiority side looked impressive. Two hundred drones, fifty manned ships. Our own force of scrambled fighters would only number around a hundred and fifty.

But we were the DDF, battle forged and growing in skill each day, while the Superiority fielded drone pilots trained to be nonaggressive and a group of new recruits with only a couple weeks in the cockpit. Winzik had to know his forces were actually at a disadvantage.

*He also knows we're growing stronger each day, and now—after finding the remnants of my destructor pistol—fears we've been able to get to Starsight. He knows we have cytonics. He knows we were spying on his operations . . .*

I suddenly saw a different cast to this battle. I saw a terrified Winzik realizing that his prisoners were out of control, that the threat he'd often used to scare the rest of the Superiority was actually real. So what was his plan here? It had to be more than just letting his fledgling space force die to our destructors.

As the two groups of fighters began to engage, I strained to put together what the Krell leader might be planning. Unfortunately, I'd never been the one to worry about large-scale tactics. My job was to get in the cockpit and start shooting. Sure, I could think on my feet and win a battle, but today I needed to be more. I understood the enemy better than anyone else. I'd lived among them. I'd talked to their general, listened to his orders.

What was he doing here, today? I watched the battle, and slowly I stood up from the seat—the admiral's chair, where I loomed over the entire room. I stared at the blips on the screen and saw the people beyond them. I felt the world fading slightly around me. I saw . . . and heard . . . stars.

*. . . reporting live from the Detritus refuge . . .*

*. . . brave fighters, hoping to hold back the human scourge . . .*

Winzik was broadcasting these events. This attack was theatrics. I imagined millions of people back on Starsight, watching the broadcast in fear. Winzik could destroy his reputation by failing here. And he would, wouldn't he? He couldn't defeat us.

*. . . reports that the humans are doing something strange . . .*

*. . . this refuge, which is surrounded by ancient mechanisms, remnants from the Second Human War . . .*

*. . . the movement of those platforms. Something seems to be happening . . .*

Beyond it all, I heard something else. Like . . . like a building scream. Or a challenge? Was that Brade? Screaming into the nowhere? She couldn't do that—it would draw the eyes. It would—

It snapped into focus. The things I was hearing, Cuna's warnings, Brade's explanations from earlier. Winzik's plan.

They were going to intentionally bring a delver into our realm.

A few of the people in the room noticed me, and Rikolfr nudged Cobb. “Spin?” the admiral asked, stepping up.

“I need to go, sir,” I said, still staring at the battle map.

“I don’t know if we can risk you,” he said. “None of our other ships can protect your brain from cytonic attacks. Besides, we don’t know if we can get any of these hyperspace slugs you mention . . . so, well, you might be needed soon.”

“I’m needed right now,” I said. I looked down at him. “Something terrible is about to happen. I don’t think I can explain it to you. I don’t have the time. But I *have* to stop it.”

“Go,” he told me. “We might be able to defeat the fighters, but those battleships? Now that they’ve finally decided to throw everything at us, our time is running out. So if you can do something . . . well, go. Saints watch over you.”

I was off and running toward the hall before he even finished.

As I ran, I felt the shadow grow stronger inside me.

By approaching the nowhere to listen, I'd let more of it in. The thoughts of the delvers. They touched the part of me that I couldn't explain.

This part of me hated everyone. The buzzing noises people made. The clicks and the disruption of the pure calm void that was space.

The human inside me fought back. It saw lives behind the blips on the screen. It had flown with the enemy and had found friends in them.

I didn't understand myself. How could I be both of these things at once? How could I want to stop the fighting, but at the same time hope they'd all just destroy themselves?

I exploded from the bay of Platform Prime, flying my Superiority ship, as it was the only ship not in use at the moment. Cobb really *was* worried. He'd mobilized every fighter we had.

Following a provided course through the shells around Detritus, I accelerated constantly, my back pressing into the seat. Eventually I emerged into space beyond the shells—and confronted the chaos of hundreds of ships fighting at once. Destructor blasts tore streaks through the blackness, and ships exploded with flashes of light that were quickly extinguished. In the distance, the *Weights and Measures* watched stoically alongside the two battleships.

I thought I understood Winzik's plan, and it had a kind of twisted brilliance to it. He needed to exterminate the humans of Detritus. By escaping, we were coming too close to proving him weak, or even a fraud. But he didn't yet have the space force he needed to do the job himself.

At the same time, he needed a delver in our realm that he could control and use as a threat. He couldn't be seen summoning it himself, however. So what did he do? He sent his forces to Detritus to "bravely fight" the humans. Then he secretly had Brade draw a delver into our realm and let it

destroy Detritus. He could blame the summoning on us. After all, everyone knew the humans had tried to do this once before.

After consuming the humans, the delver would move on, searching for other prey. But Winzik could use his newly trained space force to control it—send it someplace safe, bounce it between unpopulated worlds.

In so doing, he'd become a hero—and the most important being in the galaxy. Because with a roving delver threatening all the civilized worlds, only his force would provide any protection. His pilots would be on call to defend planets who asked for them—but if someone opposed him, well, the delver might just find its way to their region with no defense force to send it away.

Brutal. Effective.

Terrifying.

I boosted toward the fight, where starfighters spun and dodged, blasted and fought. Where was Brade? I could hear her shouting into the nowhere, but I couldn't sense *where*. Would she be on the *Weights and Measures*?

*No. They wouldn't want the thing to come into our realm near one of their ships. She'll be out here somewhere.*

But where? This battle was several times larger than any I'd been in before—probably larger, I realized, than *anyone* in this fight had ever seen. The battlefield was quickly devolving into chaos as flights tried to stick together and admirals frantically tried to keep a coherent strategy.

A familiar sense of excitement built inside me, the anticipation of the fight, the opportunity to push myself. But . . . today it was accompanied by a hesitance I might once have called cowardice. I silently thanked Cobb for beating that out of me during training.

I wasn't here to fight. So instead of firing on the first Superiority drone that passed by, I studied my proximity monitor—and realized that it was still attuned to Superiority signals. They'd blocked me from their general communications chatter, so I couldn't hear what they were saying to one another, but I could still highlight individual ships and designations on my monitor.

I picked out a specific starfighter flying mostly by itself, near the far right side of the battlefield. The *Swims Against the Current in a Stream Reflecting the Sun*. Hesho's ship. My old flight. They might know where Brade was.

But Hesho and I were enemies now. He knew me for what I really was, the thing that he hated.

I steered my ship that direction anyway. I zipped down through the battlefield to avoid the shots of several drones—then the shots of several DDF fighters, who obviously hadn't believed my signal code that identified me as an ally.

The drones and the DDF fighters ended up engaging one another, which left me to swing around toward Hesho. The kitsen turned their ship toward mine, and I stopped a good distance away, slowing down until I was motionless in space. Now what?

I tried opening a private channel to the kitsen ship. "Hesho," I said. "I'm sorry."

No response. Indeed, the ship powered up its destructors and started toward me. I could practically hear the orders on board as Hesho commanded the kitsen to prepare for battle. My fingers twitched on my controls. They thought they could take me? Did they *really* want to push me to see? They were insignificant, meaningless noises upon a vast . . .

*No.* I took my hand off my control sphere and checked the seals on my helmet.

Then I popped my canopy open.

The air in my canopy was sucked out into the void in a rush of wind. Water in the air immediately vaporized, then froze, causing frost to condense across the inside of the glass. Crystals of it sparkled in the air, reflecting the light of the distant sun.

I undid the latches on my seat, all except the one cord that would pull tight to lock my feet into place if I ejected. That one had some slack right now, and tethered me to the cockpit.

I floated out, closing my eyes. I imagined I was soaring. Free. Me, the void, and the stars. Those sang distant songs, but there was a louder noise growing nearby. At the back of the battlefield. It was building. The delver was coming.

"What are you doing?" Hesho's voice said in my ear. "Get back into your ship so we can engage in combat."

"No," I whispered.

"This is foolishness, Alanik—or whatever your real name is. I am warning you. We will not delay our fire simply because you are

indisposed.”

“I promised you, Hesho,” I said. “Remember? First shot at a human is yours.”

I opened my eyes to the surreal scene of emptiness all around. I’d always known it was there—I’d flown through it—but for some reason, being out of my ship, with only the suit to keep me from the vacuum, made it all more real to me.

Once, I’d looked up at the sky and been awed by it. Now it engulfed me, consumed me. There didn’t seem to be a line between me and it. We were one.

It was pierced in the nowhere by whatever Brade was doing. A shout, projected into the nowhere. A dangerous scream . . .

Hesho’s ship hovered up in front of me, mere meters away, destructor turrets trained on me. I stared back at them.

“You speak of promises,” Hesho said. “When all you ever gave me were lies.”

“I was always the same person, Hesho,” I said. “You never knew Alanik. You only knew *me*.”

“A human.”

“An ally,” I said. “Back when we were pilots together, you spoke to me about a shared desire to resist the Superiority and find our own way to use hyperdrives. I have the secret, Hesho. I found it. You can take it back to your people.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Why should you believe them?” I asked. “You know I’m not the monster they say I am. You flew with me. Our people were allies once, long ago. You know the Superiority doesn’t care about your kind. Come with me. Help me.”

No response. I reached out to the ship.

“Hesho,” I whispered, “Winzik is planning something terrible. I think he’s going to use Brade to summon a delver. If that’s true, I need your help. The entire galaxy needs your help. We don’t need just a ship’s captain right now. We need a *hero*.”

Beyond us, the battle raged. Two forces of frightened people, each with no choice but to kill the other. It was either that or die.

“I don’t know what to do,” Hesho said.

“Maybe,” Kauri’s voice said from the background, “you could ask us?”

The comm went dead. I hung there, floating in space just above my ship. Then finally, Hesho spoke again.

“Apparently,” Hesho said, “my crew does not want to shoot you. I have been . . . overruled. What a curious experience. Very well, Alanik. We will ally for a short time—long enough for us to learn whether you are telling us the truth or not.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a sense of relief. Then I tugged with my foot, yanking myself back toward my cockpit. “Where are the others? Morriumur?” I braced myself to hear that they’d been shot down. After all, why else would the kitsen be out here by themselves?

“Morriumur did not come,” Hesho said. “They decided at the last minute that their time as a pilot was done, and so returned to their family. Vapor is out here somewhere; I lost her in the fighting. Brade . . .”

“You’re right about this, Alanik,” Kauri said from the bridge. “Brade is doing something strange. We’re supposed to distract the human fighters and keep them away from her. She’s secretly flying closer to your planet.”

“I can feel her,” I said, locking myself back into place and repressurizing my cockpit. “But I can’t locate her. This is bad. Very, *very* bad. We need to stop her.”

“By joining you,” Hesho said, “we will be committing treason against the Superiority.”

“Hesho,” I said, “part of the reason everyone hates my kind is because several hundred years ago, humans tried to turn the delvers into weapons. Are you really going to sit there and ignore the fact that the Superiority is about to try to do the *very same thing*?”

The humans of Detritus had failed in their attempt to control a delver. I’d watched them die. Winzik was confident he wouldn’t suffer the same fate, but I didn’t believe that for a moment. I’d felt the delvers. Their ideas kept trying to worm their way into my brain even now. He could not control them. If his plan succeeded, the delver *would* escape his control. Just like we humans were threatening to do.

I exploded across the battlefield, and the *Swims Upstream* followed. “Surely they wouldn’t be so foolhardy as to play with this danger,” Hesho said to me. “Surely there’s another explanation for what Brade is doing.”



“They’re *terrified* of humans, Hesho,” I said. “And Winzik needs a decisive victory here to prove to the Superiority how powerful he is. Think about it. Why train a force to fight delvers, when it’s been decades since anyone saw one? The ‘weapon’ Winzik developed is really just a way to point the delvers where he wants them. This isn’t about just Detritus. It’s about him finding a way to control the entire galaxy.”

“If this is true,” Hesho said, “then the Superiority will become even *more* dominant than they are now. You said you know the secret of their hyperdrives. Will you give it to us, as proof of your good faith?”

I debated only a moment. Yes, this secret was important—but people controlling it, and keeping it from others, was part of the problem. “Look up a species of slug called a taynix. The Superiority claims they’re dangerous, and should be reported immediately if spotted—but this is because they’re cytonic and the Superiority doesn’t want people to know. Using them somehow, the Superiority can teleport their ships without drawing the attention of delvers.”

“By the ancient songs . . . ,” Hesho whispered. “There was a small colony of them on our planet. The Superiority sent a force to helpfully exterminate them, supposedly before the outbreak could destroy us. Those rats! Here, I have the battle plans from the *Weights and Measures*. We should be able to use this to deduce where Brade is. They needed to get her close to your planet.”

“So the delver would attack Detritus first,” I said. “Instead of going after the Superiority ships.”

“I have it!” one of the kitsen said from the bridge. I thought it was Hana. “From the layout of the battle, I suspect Brade’s ship should be at the coordinates I’m relaying to your monitor, Alanik.”

We turned in that direction, though it required cutting through the middle of the increasingly frantic battlefield. We dodged around a set of DDF fighters with Nightstorm Flight markings, then through some ship debris that made my shield flash. We were picking up speed when a handful of Krell drones fell in behind us.

“The *Weights and Measures* has finally spotted us, Captain!” a kitsen called over the line. “They’re demanding to know what we’re doing.”

“Stall!” Hesho said.

I didn't know if that would do any good. They'd noticed me, judging by the way the drones were starting to fly in after us. I hit my overburn, but this ship just wasn't built like M-Bot. She was serviceable, but she wasn't *exceptional*—and the kitsen ship was even slower.

As we fell into defensive maneuvers, I was made specifically thankful that I'd forced the kitsen and the others to do dogfighting exercises. We were likely only surviving because the battlefield was so frantic. Drone pilots had difficulty tracking us, and even more difficulty breaking away without immediately getting shot down.

Somehow we made it—and I picked out a solitary black fighter flying with expert precision. Brade. But she wasn't quite in the place that the battle plan indicated. Instead, she was fighting against a drone for some reason. As we watched, Brade scored a series of hits on the drone, overwhelming its shield and destroying it.

Hesho and I gave chase, followed in turn by a few more drones. I could hear the sound of Brade's mind growing louder, an increasingly demanding cytonic scream. The power of it made me tremble, and that interfered with my ability to fly—as it took me a moment to notice that one of the drones chasing us was behaving oddly. It fell out of line with the other two, then shot them down from behind.

"So," Vapor said over a private channel to my ship. "You're from *this* planet? Not ReDawn? A human from one of the preserves. Does Cuna know?"

"I told them," I said, adding her to the line with Hesho. "Right before this mess happened. I'm sorry, Vapor, for lying—"

"I don't really care," Vapor said. "I should have guessed the full truth. Anyway, my mission was—and still is—to keep a watch on Winzik and his minions. Is Brade doing what I think she's doing?"

"She's trying to summon a delver," I said. "She's calling to them—well, more like screaming at them. I get the feeling she hasn't done this before."

I glanced at my canopy, and—alongside the growing headache I felt from Brade's yelling—I started to see their reflections. The eyes opening up, looking at us from the nowhere.

"It's working," I added to the others. "The delvers are watching us right now. I can feel them . . . stirring."

Vapor said a string of words that my pin simply translated as, “Increasingly vulgar curses involving foul stench.”

“I didn’t think they’d go this far,” Vapor said. “This is bad—many would call this treason against the Superiority.” She was silent for a moment. “Others would call it true patriotism.”

“Surely there can’t be many of those!” Hesho said.

“It will probably depend on whether this attack works,” Vapor said. “A lot of people in the Superiority *really* hate humans, and policy often favors the successful. Does he have a plan for sending the thing away after he summons it?”

“I think he just plans to use his space force to keep it distracted,” I said. “Brade indicated that delvers in our realm would sometimes spend years between attacks.”

“Sometimes they would,” Vapor replied. “But sometimes they’d attack relentlessly. This is extremely shortsighted.”

She fell in on my left, Hesho on my right, as I steered my ship after Brade. She was making for the shells around Detritus, trying to get as close to the planet as she could.

Knowing where she was going gave us a slight advantage, as we could aim to head her off. I set us on that heading, but a distressing thought occurred to me: I wasn’t certain the three of us could stop Brade. She was good—even better than I was. Plus, a delver could appear at any moment.

Maybe I could do something to mitigate the disaster of that occurring. I called in on the general DDF line. “Flight Command? This is Spin. I need to talk to Cobb.”

“I’m here,” Cobb said in my ear.

“I need you to turn off all communications with ships out here. Have every DDF ship go silent, turn off all radios in Alta—maybe even power down Platform Prime and go dark.”

I braced myself for an argument. But Cobb was strikingly calm when he replied. “You realize, Spin, that would mean leaving all of the pilots to fight on their own. No coordination. No ground support. Not even the ability to call for help from wingmates.”

“I realize that, sir.”

“I would want to be absolutely certain it was necessary before taking such an extreme action.”

“Sir . . . one of *them* is coming. A delver.”

“I see.” Cobb didn’t curse, or shout, or even complain. His calm tone was somehow far, *far* more disturbing. “I’ll warn the pilots, then initiate communications silence. Stars watch over you, Lieutenant. And the rest of us sorry souls.” He cut the line.

I felt a chill, a mounting horror, as Brade—like I’d hoped—turned toward us. We were seconds from intercepting her.

“Vapor,” Hesho asked. “Can you take over her ship, like you’ve done with the drones?”

“It’s harder for a crewed ship than it is for a drone,” Vapor said. “She’ll have a manual override, developed for resisting my kind. I could probably lock her out of flight control and force the ship to go immobile, for a little time at least. I’d need to touch her ship—which will mean ejecting from this drone and trying to get to her. So far, she has known to stay away from ships I’m flying, and hasn’t let me get within range of seizing her vessel.”

“Understood,” I said. “Be ready to try.” I didn’t order radio silence among the three of us—I hoped to protect Detritus, but for now our communication was vital to our last-ditch attempt at stopping this.

By shooting down one of my friends.

I opened a line to her as our ships drew closer. “Brade. You know why we’re here.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I don’t blame you. You were born to kill.”

“No, Brade—”

“I should have seen what you were. I *knew* you felt it. The need to destroy, like a dragon coiled inside, stoking its flame. Waiting to strike, longing to strike. *Lusting* to strike.”

“*Please* don’t make us do this.”

“What, and give up the fight?” she said. “Admit it. You’ve been wondering all along, haven’t you? Which of us is better? Well, let’s find out.”

I gritted my teeth, then switched back to the private channel to Hesho and Vapor. “All right, team. We need to take her out.” Her screaming mind echoed in my brain, louder than her words had been. “And we can’t simply shoot to disable. She’ll keep trying to bring that delver as long as she’s alive. So if you have the chance . . . kill her.”

We split apart as we drew close, the three of us trying to swing around and coordinate an attack from all sides. I swooped down closer to the shell around the planet, anticipating—correctly—that Brade would dodge that way first.

Her screaming grew softer as we forced her to concentrate on her flying. I could feel that I was right about her—she didn't know how to do this, not fully. She could project a scream into the nowhere, and I could see deliver eyes watching from the reflection in my canopy, but whatever crucial step remained in bringing one here, Brade hadn't figured it out yet.

Likely she'd assumed it would be easy. Each time I went into the nowhere, I worried one of these things would pounce on me—or worse, follow me out. Fortunately, it didn't seem quite so easy to pull one through.

At my mark, the three of us cut in, trying to hit Brade from every angle. I anticipated that she'd accelerate and get out of the way. Instead, she spun around and didn't dodge at all—letting our destructor blasts hit her. What?

The maneuver put us too close to her. By instinct, I spun my ship and tried to boost away—but wasn't able to do so before Brade hit her IMP, breaking down *everyone's* shields.

Scud! That was what I would have done, and I'd fallen right into it. Always before, I had been the single pilot fighting against superior numbers. I didn't know how to think from the other direction—as someone trying to gang up on a single ship.

Warnings blared on my dash as I belatedly boosted away. The kitsen—who had dedicated gunners—got off some shots at Brade as she zipped off, but none landed.

I looped around, picking up Vapor as a wingmate. In the near distance, the enormous space battle continued—and I could sense a more *frantic* feel to it. Perhaps that was my own interpretation, but it seemed as if the fighters

were more desperate. I tried not to think about how Kimmalyne and the others must feel to suddenly fight blindly, without communications.

Brade tried to bolt away, flying in closer to the defensive platforms. Enormous sheets of metal curved into the distance as we swooped down—but I refused to be caught in a trap like I had once used against drones. Vapor and I stayed out of range of the defensive guns until Brade was forced by their shots to pull up.

She couldn't let us fall too far behind, or we'd have a chance to reignite our shields. Indeed, as I tried, she came right at me, forcing me to go into a defensive pattern. I had to abandon reignition, since I would need time flying straight—without much maneuverability, and all power diverted to the igniter—to get my shield back up.

“Hesho,” I said over the private line, “on me. Vapor, take a sniping position and be ready to shoot her while we distract her.”

“Affirmative,” both of them said, Vapor falling back and Hesho coming in beside me.

Brade swooped around, and we intercepted her with destructors blaring. We couldn't aim very well, sweeping in as we were—we just needed to distract her from Vapor. Again she anticipated our tactics. Instead of engaging me and Hesho, she spun backward in a reversal that must have seen her pulling ten or fifteen Gs. I swooped around, but by the time I got on her tail she was already firing at Vapor.

Vapor tried to dodge, but one of the shots caught her. The wing blasted off her ship—which wouldn't have been deadly in space, but the next shot ripped apart her hull, venting the cockpit. Including her.

*She can survive that*, I thought at myself forcibly, firing at Brade. I came so close to hitting her, the shots narrowly missing her canopy as she dodged around, weaving between my destructor blasts.

Brade got off a shot as she turned, and it nailed the *Swims Upstream*.

“We're hit!” a kitsen voice shouted. “Lord Hesho!”

A dozen other kitsen voices cried out reports, and the *Swims Upstream* floundered, venting air. I couldn't focus on that, unfortunately. I gritted my teeth and got in behind Brade.

The scream in my mind slacked off even further as the dogfight narrowed to just the two of us. Woman against woman. Pilot against pilot.

We swooped past some ancient rubble, spinning and tumbling, trapped in orbit, and Brade pivoted around it with her light-lance.

I followed, staying on her—but just barely. We spun through the darkness, neither of us firing, focused only on the chase. I had the upper hand from the rear position, but . . .

But *Saints* she was good. All else faded. World beneath me, stars above, set against the backdrop of a terrible battle. None of it mattered. The two of us were a pair of sharks chasing one another through a sea of minnows. She managed to draw me in close to the defensive platforms, then loop around me as I was forced to dodge a shot.

I stayed ahead of her in turn, then threw us both into a spiral where I barely managed to cut out and swing around her, taking position on her tail again.

It was thrilling, invigorating. I felt as I rarely had before, challenged to the absolute limits of my ability. And Brade *was* better. She stayed just ahead of me and dodged each shot I took.

I found that exhilarating.

I'd often been the best pilot in the sky. Seeing someone who was better was perhaps the most inspiring thing I'd ever experienced. I wanted to fly with her, chase her, pit myself against her until I covered that distance and matched her.

But as I was grinning, I again heard her screaming into the nowhere. It was faint, but in its wake my illusion of enjoyment came crashing down. Brade was trying to destroy everything I loved. If I couldn't stop her, if I wasn't good enough, that spelled the end of the DDF, Detritus, and *humankind itself*.

In that light, my inability was terrifying.

*I don't have to beat her alone*, I thought. *I just have to get her to go where I want . . .*

I broke off and darted away. I could *feel* Brade's annoyance. She'd been enjoying this too, and suddenly she felt angry at me for my cowardice. I was running?

She gave immediate chase, firing at me. I had to stay ahead for only a short while longer. I dodged around a specific collection of space debris, and Brade followed. I held my breath . . .

"Got her!" Vapor said over Brade's own channel.

I spun my ship around and boosted back toward Brade's ship—which had followed me through the rubble of Vapor's destroyed drone—as it slowed. I could see right into the cockpit, where she pounded on her console in frustration.

Her ship powered off anyway, Vapor locking down the systems. We had her. I slowed my own ship, then pointed the nose right at Brade. My own words seemed to echo back at me.

*We can't simply shoot to disable. She'll keep on trying to bring that delver as long as she's alive . . .*

As if in direct proof of that, she met my gaze, then projected a scream into the nowhere. The eyes—which had been fading—snapped their attention back on us, particularly one pair that seemed larger than all the rest.

I squeezed the trigger. In that moment, Brade's scream went shriller than it ever had before. In the panic of knowing she would die, Brade finally accomplished her goal.

And something emerged from the nowhere.



The delver's emergence distorted reality. In one blink of an eye, Brade's ship went from being in front of me to being shoved aside. Something vast entering our realm pushed us back, like we were riding a wave rippling through reality itself.

The shot I'd taken at Brade missed, and was instead absorbed by the expanding blackness.

My ship rocked as I was thrust away. The blackness grew so large that it dominated my view. I thought I saw the core of the delver for a moment, that deep shadow. An absolute darkness that seemed too pure to actually exist.

And then the maze appeared, matter coalescing around the thing like . . . like condensation forming on a very cold pipe. It grew around the core, shooting out terrible spires, gathering to be the size of a small planet. Much larger than the maze we'd trained in.

That maze was soon shrouded in dust and particulate matter, a haze that obscured it. Dark spires cast shadows within, lit by flares of deep red, the color of molten stone. Storms of terrible colors and mind-bending shadows. A vast, nearly incomprehensible thing, hidden within the floating dust.

This enormous thing now loomed like a moon over Detritus—*far* too close. My sensors went crazy; the delver had its own gravitational pull.

Two weeks ago, I'd watched a recording of a thing like this consuming the old inhabitants of Detritus. Now I cowered before one in real life. A speck. We were all specks to this creature.

My hands fell limp from my controls. I'd failed. And I was pretty sure that the very action I'd taken to stop this—shooting at Brade—had given her the push to achieve her goal.

I felt a sudden crushing sense of hopelessness. This thing was so immense and strange.

Then another emotion pushed through the despair. Anger. We'd die here—everyone in the Defiant Caverns—while the people of Starsight ate, and laughed, and ignored what their own government was doing. It didn't seem fair. Those insects. Those bugs that slobbered and skittered and clicked and . . . and . . .

Wait. I pushed through those overwhelming emotions. That wasn't me. That wasn't how *I* was feeling.

The battle had stilled. Detritus had gone silent, as I'd ordered. It was as if the entire planet held its breath. A mind—a vast, incomprehensible mind—brushed against mine. Something so oppressive, it threatened to crush me.

*There's nothing here, I thought in a panic. Nothing to destroy. You see? No buzzing, no annoyances here. Go somewhere else. Go . . . go that way.*

I fed it a destination. Not really by intent—more like the way you'd throw something hot after touching it unexpectedly. I pointed it toward a place in the far distance. The direction where Winzik's broadcast was going, the direction where the stars were singing.

I felt the delver's attention turn. Yes, there were things nearby—Superiority ships—making noise, but it wanted something larger. It could *hear* that distant destination, the place where I'd nudged its attention.

It vanished, following that distant song.

I was sucked forward by the ripple in reality, same as I'd been pushed back by it earlier. Sweat beaded on the sides of my face as confusion fought relief. It was gone. Just like that, it was gone.

I had sent it to destroy Starsight instead.

“Hello?” a kitsen voice said over my comm.

I stared out into the void, numb.

“Alanik . . . I . . . I don’t actually know what your name is. It’s me, Kauri. We . . . we sustained great losses. Lord Hesho is dead. I’ve taken command, but I don’t know what to do.”

Hesho? Dead? The kitsen ship hovered up by mine. A black gouge had been blasted out of the side, but the crew had patched it with a shield.

“The Superiority forces are retreating,” Vapor said. “Ships are disengaging from the humans and flying back toward the *Weights and Measures*. Perhaps they are frightened, now that their terrible weapon has failed.”

“It didn’t fail,” I whispered. “It’s gone to Starsight instead. They . . . they didn’t quiet themselves enough. They’ve come to rely on their communications. It heard them.”

“What is this?” Kauri said. “Could you repeat that, please? You said the delver has *gone to Starsight*.”

“Yes.” *I sent it.*

“No! We have *family* on the station! And crew members who were too sick for duty. There are . . . there are *millions of people* on Starsight!”

A drone hovered up beside me. Vapor had stolen herself a new ship. I barely noticed. I was watching the stars, listening to their sounds.

“Winzik . . . that monster,” Vapor said. “This is exactly what happened when humans tried to control a delver during the second war. It turned against the very ones who’d summoned it. His broadcast of these events gave the thing a pathway *right back* to his home!”

It had been that, yes, but more my own interference. *I* had done this. Saints and stars . . . I’d sent it to destroy them. Brade was right. We could control these things.

“We can’t let this . . . ,” Kauri said, sounding helpless. “Maybe we could return to the *Weights and Measures*? Have it fly us back to Starsight, to fight? But . . . the retreat is going to take time; the carrier needs to wait for those fighters to disengage. It could be half an hour before the ship gets back to the city.”

Far too long. Starsight was doomed. All those people. Cuna and Mrs. Chamwit. Morriumur. Because of me. I felt . . . I felt like the delver had sensed my fury. Was that possible?

“What have you done?” Brade demanded over the comm. I glanced to the side and saw her ship had stopped tumbling nearby. “*What have you done?*”

“What I had to,” I whispered. “To save my people.”

In so doing, I’d doomed another people. But would anyone blame me for that choice? I knew that even if Winzik’s ships *did* reach the delver in time, their “weapon” against it was merely a way of diverting its attention. They’d try to send it back here to destroy us instead.

It was us or them.

Brade’s ship vanished, slipping into the nowhere.

“What do we do?” Vapor asked.

“I don’t know,” Kauri said. “I . . . I . . .”

There was nothing to do. I reignited my shield, then leaned my head back and accepted what was happening.

Leave the Superiority to its own problems. They’d caused this. They deserved it. My only worry was for M-Bot and Doomslug. Surely he’d be safe. He was a ship.

Regardless, what could I do? Us or them. I turned my ship around, away from the stars, to head back home.

*No.*

My hands moved off the controls.

“This isn’t my fight,” I whispered.

*A hero doesn’t choose her trials,* Gran-Gran’s voice said.

“I don’t know how to stop it.”

*A hero faces what comes next.*

“They hate us! They think we’re only worthy of being destroyed!”

*Prove them wrong.*

“Um . . . Alanik?” Kauri asked, uncertain, moving her ship up beside mine.

I took a long deep breath, then looked back at the stars.

Scud. I couldn’t abandon those people.

I *could not* run from this fight.

“Bring your ships in close,” I said to the kitsen and to Vapor. “Touch your wings to mine if you can.”

“Why?” Vapor asked, obeying. Her wing tapped mine, and the kitsen’s did so on the other side. “What are we doing?”

“Stepping into the darkness,” I said.

Then I flung us into the nowhere.

## INTERLUDE

Being two people was an uncomfortable experience for Morriumur. On the left, one could argue that Morriumur had never known anything different. On the right, one could point out that one's separate halves—and the memories they had inherited—knew precisely how odd the experience was.

Two minds thinking together, but blending memories and experiences from the past. Only *some* from each parent, a stew of personality and memory. Occasionally their instincts fought against one another. Earlier in the day, Morriumur had reached to scratch their head—but both hands had tried to do it at once. And before that, at the sound of a loud bang—just a dish being dropped—Morriumur had tried to both dodge for cover and jump up to help at the same time.

This disjunction was growing even worse as the two halves prepared to separate and recombine again. Morriumur stepped toward the drafting pod, passing through a double row of family members—lefts on one side, rights the other, with agendered choosing either side. They held out the appropriate hand, brushing Morriumur's own extended hands as they passed through the dark room.

Morriumur was supposed to have two and a half months left, but after leaving the space force . . . well, the decision had been made to proceed early. This draft was not right. Morriumur's parents and family agreed. Time to try again.

Everyone said it wasn't supposed to feel like a farewell, and that Morriumur shouldn't see it as a rejection. Redrafting was common, and they had been assured it wouldn't hurt. Yet how could one take it as anything *but* a rejection?

*Too aggressive, one grand had said. This will trouble them all their life.*

*They chose to investigate a career very unbecoming of a dione, one pibling had said. They could never be happy like this.*

These same relatives gave Morriumur fond lip-draws, touching hands with them as if seeing them off on a journey. The drafting pod was much like a large bed, though with the center hollowed out. Shaped of the traditional wood with a slick polished interior, once Morriumur climbed into it, its lid would be affixed and a nutrient bath injected to help with the cocooning and redrafting process.

Their eldest grand, Numiga, took both of their hands as they stepped up to the pod. “You did well, Morriumur.”

“If that’s so . . . why have I failed to prove myself?”

“Your job wasn’t to prove yourself. It was merely to exist and let us see possibilities. Come, you yourself returned to us and agreed the process needed to continue.”

Morriumur’s left hand gave a curved gesture of affirmation, almost on its own. They *had* returned. Departed the docks while the others went to fight. Fled, because . . . because they’d been too upset to continue. Defending against delvers was one thing, but going to shoot down other pilots? The idea horrified Morriumur.

*You’d have been too frightened to fight a delver anyway, a part of them—perhaps one of their parents—thought. Too aggressive for dione society. Too paranoid to fight. Redrafting is for the best.*

*For the best,* another part of them thought.

Morriumur stumbled, feeling a disorientation caused by the two separating parts of their brain. Numiga helped them sit on the side of the drafting pod, their deep reddish-violet skin seeming to glow in the candlelight.

“It’s beginning,” Numiga said. “It is time.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“It will not hurt,” Numiga promised. “It will still be you who comes out, redrafted. Just a different you.”

“What if I want to be *the same* me?”

Numiga patted them on the hand. “Almost all of us went through a few drafts, Morriumur, and we all survived it. When you emerge again, you will wonder why you were so bothered.”

Morriumur nodded and put both feet into the pod. Then they paused. “When I come back out, will I remember these months?”

“Faintly,” Numiga said. “Like fragments of a dream.”

“And my friends? Will I know their faces?”

Numiga pushed them, gently, into the pod. It *was* time. Morriumur’s two halves were unraveling, the minds separating, and their personality . . . stretched thin. It was . . . hard . . . to . . . think . . .

The chamber rocked with a sudden extended tremble. Morriumur grabbed the side of the pod, hissing out in surprise. Around them, the others stumbled against one another, crying out or hissing. People fell as the trembling persisted, until finally it grew still.

What had *that* been? It felt like the platform had been hit by something—but what kind of impact could be so large that it would shake all of Starsight?

Outside, screams sounded in the streets. Morriumur’s relatives climbed to their feet in a mess, pushing aside the drapings in front of the doorway. They opened it and let light flood the small dark chamber.

Trembling, barely able to control their limbs, Morriumur crawled out of the pod. Everyone seemed to have forgotten them. What . . . what could be happening? Pulling themselves up on the equipment near the pod, Morriumur got to their feet and stumbled to the door leading outside, where many of their relatives stood staring upward in a wide-eyed stupor.

A *planet* had somehow appeared beside Starsight. A dark, dust-shrouded thing, with terrible lines emerging from within its black center. Deep red lights played beneath the dust, like eruptions of magma. It loomed over Starsight, a spectacle so vast—so unexpected—that both of Morriumur’s minds reeled. How could *that* be *there*, interrupting the calming depths of space that had always been on the horizon?

*It’s a delver!* one mind trembled. *Run!*

*Flee!* the other mind screamed.

Around Morriumur, relatives scrambled away, running—though how did you run from something like this? Within moments, only Morriumur was standing there before the building, alone. Their minds continued to panic, but Morriumur didn’t let go, and slowly their minds relaxed and knit back together.

It wouldn’t last long. But for now, Morriumur looked up and exposed their teeth.



Cuna gripped the rail of their balcony, trying to take in the awesome sight of the delver.

“We’ve failed,” they whispered. “He’s destroyed Detritus. Now he brings it here to show off his power.”

The scent around them turned sharply angry, like that of wet soil. “This is a disaster,” Zezin said. “You said . . . I didn’t believe . . . Cuna, how *could* Winzik do this?”

Cuna gave a helpless gesture of their fingers, still staring up at the terrible sight. The awesome scale of the thing made it difficult to tell, but Cuna could *feel* the thing drawing closer, approaching the city.

“He’ll destroy us,” Cuna realized. “The high minister is still in attendance. Winzik will take out the Superiority’s government, leaving only himself.”

“No,” Zezin said, smelling of hot spices. “Even he is not so callous. This is a mistake, Cuna. He summoned it, but cannot control it as he assumed. It has come here of its own volition.”

Yes. Cuna realized the truth of it immediately. Winzik wanted to be known as a hero; he would not destroy Starsight. This wasn’t just a mistake—it was a disaster of the highest order. The same foolishness that had made the humans fall.

Ships began to stream away in a panic, and Cuna wished them speed. Maybe some would escape.

It was a dubious hope. Starsight was doomed, and Cuna couldn’t help feeling an awful responsibility. Would Winzik have ever decided upon this course if the two of them hadn’t brainstormed a potential defense force, years ago?

Embers began to launch from the delver, slamming into the shield around Starsight and bursting with incredible explosions. Soon the shield would fall.

The air turned a sour scent of rotting fruit—sorrow and anguish from Zezin.

“Go,” Cuna whispered. “You might be able to move quickly enough to escape.”

“We . . . we will stop this from going further, Cuna,” Zezin promised. “We’ll resist Winzik. Clean up his mess.”

“Go.”

Zezin left. Figments could move quickly through the air, or even the vacuum. They both knew that alone, Zezin could perhaps reach a private ship in time to fly out beyond the shield and hyperjump away.

An old dione, however . . . Was there anything Cuna could do to help? Send a last broadcast perhaps, exposing Winzik? Give courage to those fleeing? Was there even time for that?

Cuna gripped the banister, looking out at the delver. Shrouded in its veil—glowing from its own light—the thing had a terrifying beauty to it. Cuna almost felt like they were standing alone before a deity. A god of destruction.

Then, an incongruity finally ripped Cuna's attention away. An impossibility amid the fear.

A small group of fighters, just outside the shield, had appeared and now flew straight toward the delver.

I streaked toward the delver, Vapor and the kitsen on my wings. In my mind, the lingering horror of the nowhere shadowed my memories—that had been a bad jump, with so many of them watching me. But the one specific delver that had been so close lately hadn't been there. I could somehow tell the difference.

It wasn't hard to guess exactly where that delver was. It loomed just beyond Starsight, and had already begun launching embers by the hundreds into the shield. Chaotic emergency information channels said the city had opened the shield on the side farthest from the delver, allowing ships to escape.

"Kauri," I said, glancing at the flagging kitsen ship. "You're trailing smoke."

"Our boosters are barely working," she replied. "I'm sorry, Alanik. I don't know how useful we're going to be in a battle against those embers."

"Vapor and I should be able to manage it," I said. "Fly back and see if you can get anyone's attention on the military channels. We need the city to go silent. The delver can hear their radio signals. I don't know how we're going to drive the thing away, but I suspect it will be a *lot* easier if this city isn't screaming at it."

"Understood," Kauri said. "We'll do what we can. Good luck."

"Luck is for those who cannot smell their path forward," Vapor said. "But . . . perhaps today that is us. So good luck to you too."

The *Swims Upstream* broke off from us and started back. Vapor and I continued along just outside the atmosphere bubble. Beneath us, ships were swarming and trying to escape.

"M-Bot?" I asked, trying the secret line the two of us had been using, connected via my bracelet.

There was no response, and using my onboard sensors I was able to get a zoomed-in picture of my embassy building as we passed. The rooftop was empty. So maybe he'd gotten away somehow? Scud, I wished I knew.

Together, Vapor and I approached the delver itself. It evoked an awful sense of scale—and was far more daunting than a mere planetoid would be. Embers emerged from the dust, then smashed repeatedly into the city's shield, exploding soundlessly in the void—but some of the blasts were the size of entire battleships.

"I can't help churning upon myself a little," Vapor said as we approached, "and thinking our training was *horribly* incomplete."

"Yeah," I said. No training in a simulation could approximate the strange sensations the delver sent at me, a kind of *crushing* feeling upon my mind. It somehow heightened my fear, my anger, *and* my sense of horror. It was getting worse the closer we got.

A small blip flashed on my proximity sensor.

"What's that?" Vapor asked.

"It's her," I said, noting the ship flying ahead of us. I quickly opened a line. "Brade. You can't take this thing on by yourself."

"I'm not going to let it destroy my home," she said back. "This wasn't supposed to happen. It was supposed to go after *you*."

"Ignore that," I snapped. "Work *with* me for once."

"Alanik . . . you realize what I'm going to do if I reach the center? The only thing I *can* do?"

*Use the diversion weapon, I thought. Send it back toward Detritus again.*  
"We have to send it somewhere else, Brade. We have to try."

She cut the line.

"That one has always been a foul wind, Alanik," Vapor said. "She's . . . Oh. Um."

*She's human.*

"Cover me as we get close," I said, hitting my boosters.

We flew out from over Starsight, nearing the delver's dust cloud. The only hope I had for a plan was to try to send the delver somewhere unpopulated. I'd established three hyperjump locations in my mind: Starsight, Detritus, and the deep-space location of the delver maze.

So I only had one real option. I'd have to send it to the maze. But . . . surely it would just find nothing to destroy there, then immediately return to

Starsight. What else could I do though? Maybe it would see the maze and be distracted by it? That seemed a frail hope, but it was the only one I had.

Vapor flew out ahead of me and started shooting down the embers that approached. I slowed, and tried to reach out with my mind to the delver.

It was . . . vast. The sensations coming off it smothered me. I could feel how it regarded us. The anger at all the buzzing noises we made. Those same emotions threatened to overwhelm me, alienate me, make me feel the same way it did.

I fought against that, feeding it the location of the maze, trying—as I’d somehow done before—to distract its attention. Unfortunately, before it hadn’t just been me. It had been a mixture of my emotion, the silence on Detritus, and the sound out in the void. The singing stars.

The delver had come here because it knew the noises were greatest here. My current efforts to distract it were swallowed up by the emotion it radiated. I felt like I was screaming into a tempest, and try as I might, I couldn’t pierce the noise.

I cursed, cutting off my attempts and boosting after Vapor, blasting an ember that almost hit her.

“We need to get inside,” I said. “We need to find its heart.”

Vapor fell in next to me, and together we hurtled into the dust. Visibility dropped to nearly nothing, and I had to fly by instruments. We’d been warned we would need to do that, but nothing in our training had indicated how *creepy* it would be to enter this dust.

As we flew through that silent cloud, which flashed periodically with red light, my sensors started to go out. My proximity screen started to fuzz, giving me only the briefest warnings when something was drawing close. Embers emerged as burning shapes, indistinct and terrible.

Vapor and I stopped fighting the embers, instead just trying to dodge as they attempted to slam into us. They’d fall in and trail after us, occasionally streaking forward with bursts of speed. I felt like I was trying to outrun my own shadow.

The pressure on my mind grew worse and worse the closer we drew to the delver itself. Soon I was gritting my teeth against it—the sensations were so overpowering that they affected my flying. I barely got out of the way of one ember, but put myself into the path of another.

Frantic, I speared a third with my light-lance, which fortunately pulled me out of the way. But when I looked up, I couldn't see Vapor. My sensors were a jumble of static, and the only things I could make out around me were moving shadows and bursts of red light.

"Vapor?" I asked.

I got a jumbled response. Was that her over there? I followed another shadow, but only got further lost in the dust storm. I glanced the other direction, and saw what I was sure was an explosion.

"Vapor?"

Static.

I dodged away from another ember, but my fingers had started to tremble from the force of the thoughts pressing upon my mind.

*Buzzing . . . buzzing insects . . . Destroy them . . .*

Oppressive thoughts, weighing me down. Nightmare visions started to appear in the dust. Monsters from Gran-Gran's stories, appearing and vanishing. My father's face. Myself, but with burning white eyes . . .

This wasn't anything like the carefully designed illusions of the training maze. It was a horrific cacophony. No secrets to uncover, just noise slamming against me. Being a cytonic here was a huge disadvantage, because the delver got inside my brain.

I was barely controlling my ship. Reality and illusion melded as one, and I took my hands off the controls and pressed them against my eyes. My head had begun to throb in agony. I tried another weak effort to whisper back—to divert the thing toward deep space.

That seemed to open me further, and the noise invaded my mind. I screamed, and something smashed into my ship, *ramming* it to the side, nearly bringing down my shield. Warning alarms from my dash were just another noise. I . . . I couldn't fly in this. I . . .

A shadow emerged from the dust. My heart leaped at the shape of a ship. Vapor? *M-Bot?*

No, a shuttle, with no weapons except an industrial light-lance for moving equipment. It speared my ship and pulled me after it, away from the churning shapes. An ember—I thought it was real—roared past, narrowly missing my ship.

"Alanik?" a voice said on my comm.

I . . . I knew that voice. "Morriumur?" I whispered.

“I’ve got your ship tethered,” they said. “You were just sitting there. Are you all right?”

“The heart . . . ,” I whispered. “You have to get me to the heart. But . . . but Morriumur . . . you can’t . . . The illusions . . .”

“I can see through them!” Morriumur said.

What?

Morriumur towed me through the dust, approaching one of the spines of the delver—a large spike leading down to its surface. We flew along it, Morriumur dodging some of the nightmares, but completely ignoring others. They smashed into us and puffed away. Just . . . illusions.

“It shows different things to everyone,” Morriumur said, expertly towing me into a hole in the surface.

“Two people . . . ,” I whispered, holding my head. “You need—”

“That’s the thing, Alanik,” Morriumur said. “I *am* two people.”

I whimpered, squeezing my eyes shut at the assault, which only grew worse as we flew inside. Fortunately, Morriumur’s voice continued, somehow comforting and *real* in the middle of all the emotion and noise.

“It’s projecting two different things at me,” Morriumur said. “One to each of the brains of my parents. I . . . don’t think it knows how to deal with me. We’ve never flown a draft into a delver before, so far as I know. Honestly, I don’t think any diones at *all* ever tried flying into one of these. Our pilots have always been varvax or tenasi.

“The illusions are nothing to me, Alanik,” Morriumur said. “We didn’t realize, during training. We treated me like anyone else—but I can *see through* them as two overlapping, shadowy images. I can do this. *I can reach the heart.*”

I undid my buckles with trembling hands, barely aware of what I was doing. I ripped off my helmet, then curled up, holding my head, trying to escape the visions. I bounced against the inside of my ship as Morriumur pulled me one direction, then the next.

“A lot of these tunnels are fake,” Morriumur said. “I think the maze would have led us around in circles . . . It’s really just a big openness in here, Alanik.”

I trembled beneath an infinite weight. I don’t know how long it took, but I *felt* us getting closer. I was a child alone in a black room, and the darkness was pressing against me. Growing deeper, and deeper, and deeper . . .

“There’s something ahead.”

*Deeper and deeper and deeper . . .*

I dropped inside my cockpit, pressing against the seat.

“This is it!” The small voice came from my dash. An insect to crush. “Alanik, we’ve entered a pocket of air and gravity. What do I do now? Alanik? I never got to the heart during our training!”

“Open. My. Canopy.” I whispered the words, my voice hoarse.

A short time later, I heard a thumping as Morriumur forced open my canopy with the manual override.

“Alanik?” Morriumur asked. “I see . . . a hole over there. The membrane is an illusion. It’s just a blackness, like a hole into nothing. What do I do?”

“Help. Me.”

Eyes squeezed closed, I let Morriumur assist me out of the ship and onto the wing. I stumbled, clinging to them, and opened my eyes.

Nightmares surrounded me. Visions of dying pilots. Hurl screaming as she burned. Bim. My father. Hesho. Everyone I’d known. But I could see it too, the hole. Our ships had settled down on something solid. It looked like one of the caverns from back home. The hole was right next to my ship, a deep void in the ground.

I let go of Morriumur, pushed off them. They cried out as I dropped from the wing. And plunged into the void.



I entered a completely white room.

The pressure on my mind vanished immediately. I stumbled to a stop and looked around at the pure whiteness, somehow familiar.

I let out a long sigh, turning around until I saw myself standing beside the far wall. Not a mirror image. Me. Standing there. That was it, the delver. It looked like me the same way the one in the recording had. I wasn't sure why it chose that shape—or even if it did. Perhaps my mind simply interpreted it this way.

I walked to the delver, surprised at how confident and strong I felt. After what I'd just been through, I should have been weak, exhausted. But in here, in this white room, I had recovered.

The delver was staring at the wall. I leaned forward and saw that there were tiny pinpricks in it. Holes? I could hear a buzzing noise from them. The more I focused on it, the more awful it sounded. It was an annoyance that marred the otherwise perfectly serene room.

I looked back at the delver. It wore my face, which should have been strange. But . . . for some reason it wasn't? I prodded at it with my mind, curious.

Curiosity came back. I cocked my head, then closed my eyes. I felt . . . pain, agony, fear from the spots on the wall. The delver sensed those emotions, and reflected them back out the way they'd come.

"You don't understand emotions, do you?" I asked it. "We're misinterpreting you, like I misinterpreted Cuna. You don't hate us. You just reflect back what we feel. That's why you look like me. You're only sending back at me what I'm showing you."

It looked at me, its face impassive. And . . . I could tell that what I'd said wasn't *exactly* true. It *did* hate the buzzing sounds, the annoyances. But much of what we showed it—much of our experience of the universe—was

completely foreign to it. It reflected those back at us, part of a fundamental inability to understand.

“You have to go somewhere else,” I said to it, and tried to project the location of the delver maze.

It looked away from me, staring back at the wall.

“*Please*,” I said. “Please.”

No response. And so, I reached out my hand and touched it. The white room shattered, and suddenly I was expanding, as if . . . as if I were as large as a planet. A *galaxy*. I was expansive, eternal. I’d lived forever in peace, in a place where time had no meaning. Except when people intruded.

I saw them now, the buzzing annoyances of Starsight. The shield fell before my barrage, and I started forward, sweeping across a few of the nearby ships. Those sounds went out, and each quieted insect was a relief. It wasn’t just occasional trips through the nowhere that bothered me, but each and every one of these obnoxious buzzes.

I could finally reach them. Quiet them. It was glorious!

I pulled back, and was in the room, my hand pressed to my chest. I felt a lingering hatred of everything living. The delver would destroy all of Starsight in pursuit of its peace. I understood that, because part of me was from that place where it lived. The part that could touch the nowhere.

“Don’t,” I pleaded. “Please don’t!”

Some of the specks on the wall vanished.

What could I do? I couldn’t fight it. I was nothing more than one of those specks myself. No amount of training in a maze, fighting with destructors and light-lances, could have helped with this moment. I could not have trained to defeat this thing.

The people of Starsight deserved a diplomat, or a scientist, who could understand this problem. Not me.

More specks vanished, and—tears pouring down my face—I grabbed the front of the delver’s flight suit with both hands. I felt that overpowering expansion happening again, the alignment with its perspective, which was so vast as to make individuals meaningless.

But *they weren’t*.

“See them,” I whispered. “Please, just *see them*.”

I had seen what the delver experienced. In that frantic moment with a catastrophe starting before me, I tried to show it what *I’d* experienced. With

all my strength I towed on its consciousness.

It worked. Instead of growing to the size of a galaxy, I pulled us down so we shrank to the size of a child. Infinity went both directions. You could expand forever outward, but at the same time, the closer you looked at something, the more detail you saw.

For a moment, we were a child who played with floating globes of water. We were Mrs. Chamwit, delivering dinner to a neighbor. We were Cuna. We were the Krell on the street who had apologized for bumping me. I touched the mind of the delver and showed it those annoyances from the perspective of each individual person. I showed it that the buzzing was sometimes laughter.

*This is what I see*, I said to the delver. *Though I had to learn how to look.*

The delver stopped advancing. Its mind touched mine, and I felt emotions, images, and alien things that were neither. Things I didn't have the senses to otherwise experience or explain. In the midst of it was an idea . . . a question.

*They are like us?*

Not words. Ideas. The term *us* was projected into my mind as a set of meaningful concepts I could roughly interpret.

*They . . .*, it repeated. *They are alive?*

*Yes*, I whispered. *Every one of them.*

The thing trembled with an emotion I understood without needing interpretation. Horror.

The delver pulled in, somehow reversing upon itself. I was ejected from that place where I'd been, as the entire thing—the enormous planetlike mass and the strange being at the center—vanished.

Dumping me into space.

I'd done decompression exercises, and somehow managed to exhale before my lungs burst. Water *boiled* on my eyes, and pain shot through me, and I started to black out almost immediately. Yet I was just aware enough to feel a pair of hands grab me.

## EPILOGUE

The sound grew louder the deeper Jorgen went.

It wasn't a buzzing, not like when he'd first met Spensa. He wasn't even certain it was a sound. Nedd and Arturo couldn't hear it, after all. Maybe he was imagining it.

But Jorgen *could* hear it. A soft music, growing louder with each tunnel they had explored in the five days they'd been searching. They'd hit many dead ends and had to turn back a dozen times. But they were close now. So close he felt it was just beyond the wall here. He had to find a way to lead them left . . .

He stumbled down a short incline, then waded through water that came up to his knees. He held his industrial-strength lantern up before him, the kind used by the teams who traveled the distant tunnels and caverns of the planet to service remote equipment like pipes that carried up water from underground reservoirs.

"More water?" Arturo asked from behind, his own lantern making Jorgen cast a long shadow. "Jorgen, we *really* should get back. I could *swear* that sound we heard was an echo of the alarms. We might be under attack."

All the more reason to keep going. He waded forward as the water grew deeper. He had to know what he was hearing. *Had* to know if he was imagining things, or if . . . maybe . . . he could *hear* Detritus.

That seemed stupid when he thought about it like that. He hadn't told the others yet, except to explain he was on orders from Cobb. Which he kind of was. After a fashion.

*And everyone believes I can't disobey orders,* he thought. *They don't think I can be brash? Foolhardy? Ha!*

Running off into the deep caverns without proper supplies, and only a couple friends to accompany him? Following a hunch and something he *maybe* thought he could hear, only nobody else could?

“Jorgen?” Nedd asked, standing with Arturo at the edge of the water. “Come on. We’ve been at this forever. Arturo is right. We really need to be getting back.”

“It’s right here, guys,” Jorgen said, hip deep in water, a hand pressed against the stone wall. “Songs. *Right here*. We have to get through this wall.”

“Okaaay,” Arturo said. “So we head back, see if anyone has mapped this section of the tunnels, and maybe determine if there’s a good way to . . .”

Jorgen felt across the wall, noting that the water seemed to be flowing oddly. “There’s an opening here, just beneath the surface. It might be wide enough for me to wiggle through.”

“No,” Arturo said. “Jorgen, do *not* try to squeeze through it. You’ll get stuck and drown.”

Jorgen dropped his pack, letting his waterproof lantern float on the top of the pool. He reached down into the water, feeling at the break in the wall. It *was* wide enough. “Spensa would try it,” he said.

“Uh,” Nedd said, “is Spin *really* the best example to follow? In acting stupid?”

“Well, she does it all the time,” Jorgen said. “So she must have a lot of practice.”

Arturo rushed into the water, reaching for him. So, before he could get talked—or pulled—out of going farther, Jorgen took a deep breath and ducked under the surface, then kicked into the hole.

He couldn’t see in the water; his motions had stirred up silt, and so the lantern wouldn’t have helped either. He had to feel his way forward, grabbing the sides of the rock tunnel, and pull himself through the dark water.

Fortunately, it turned out that the tunnel wasn’t long—it wasn’t even really a tunnel. Just a passage through the stone, maybe a meter and a half in length.

He burst up into a dark cavern, and immediately felt stupid. What did he expect to find or see in the darkness? He *should* have drowned.

Then he heard the sounds. Music all around him. Flutes calling to him. The sound of the planet itself speaking?

His eyes adjusted, and he realized he *could* see. The stone here outside the small pool where he stood was overgrown with a blue-green

luminescent kind of fungus. Indeed, much larger mushrooms were growing all across the floor of the cavern, perhaps feeding off nutrient-rich water dripping from an ancient pipe running along the wall.

Hiding amid the mushrooms, fluting in a way he could now hear with both his mind *and* his ears, were a group of yellow creatures. Slugs, like Spensa's pet.

Hundreds of them.

I awoke to a soft breeze on my face.

I blinked, disoriented, seeing white. I was back in that room with the delver. No, I couldn't be! I . . .

The room came into focus. I was in a bed with white sheets, but the walls weren't stark white. Just a cream color. A window nearby looked out on the streets of Starsight, a soft breeze blowing in and ruffling the drapes.

I was hooked up to tubes and monitors and . . . and I was in a hospital. I sat up, trying to piece together how I'd gotten here.

"Ah!" a familiar voice said. "Spensa?"

I turned to find Cuna, wearing their official robes, peeking in through the door. My translator pin, fortunately, was clipped to my hospital robe.

"The doctors said you'd be waking," Cuna said. "How do you feel? Explosive decompression nearly killed you. I'd recommend against going into space without a helmet in the future! It's been three days since the delver incident."

"I . . ." I touched my face, then felt at my throat. "How did I survive?"

Cuna smiled. And actually, they were getting better at that. They settled down on a stool beside my bed, then got out their tablet and projected a holoimage for me. It showed a shuttle flying down and landing on the docks inside Starsight.

"The city's shield went down," Cuna said, "but emergency ES gravitation kept the atmosphere from escaping. Morriumur says you appeared in space once the delver vanished, and they were quick-witted enough to grab you and pull you into their cockpit."

I watched a projected Morriumur dock at Starsight, pop their canopy, then stand up, holding me, unconscious. They were met with cheers. I really was getting better at reading dione expressions, because I immediately recognized the befuddlement on Morriumur's face.

“Morriumur thought everyone was going to be angry, didn’t they?” I said. “They assumed they’d get in trouble for flying into battle.”

“Yes, but for no reason,” Cuna said. They swiped the holimage to another: this one showed two dione parents holding a small purple baby. I could see Morriumur’s features in the parents—at least, half of them on each face. “It turns out, relatives who were advocating for a redraft changed their minds quickly once the draft became a celebrity. My culture has its first war hero in centuries! It will be a few years before Morriumur develops enough to enjoy their notoriety though.”

I smiled and settled back into my pillow, feeling worn-out—but not in pain. Whatever they’d done to heal me had been effective; Superiority medical technology was obviously beyond our own.

“I can’t stay long,” Cuna said. “I need to speak at the hearings.”

“Winzik?” I asked. “Brade?”

“It’s . . . complicated,” Cuna said. “There is still some support for Winzik in the government, and there are conflicting accounts of the events a few days ago. Winzik is trying to claim that your people summoned the delver, and a brave dione—Morriumur—was our salvation.

“However, I’m confident in my case. I’ve insisted on being allowed contact with your people. Always before, Winzik’s people have been the only ones authorized to interact with the humans in the preserve.

“How surprised some of our officials were to get such calm, rational messages from your Admiral Cobb! This has proven that free humans aren’t the ravaging terrors that everyone expected. I think Winzik will be forced to step down, but it will help if you can speak to the press. I’m afraid . . . I may have nudged the doctors to wake you early for that reason.”

“It’s all right. I’m glad that—” I bolted upright. Wait. M-Bot! “My ship, Cuna! I flew here on a ship that’s very important. Where is it?”

“Don’t worry,” Cuna said. “Winzik’s department raided your embassy after you fled the city, but I’m working to get all of your things restored to you. Your leader, Cobb, mentioned the ship specifically.”

I settled back, unable to shake a sick sense of worry for M-Bot. Still, I doubted that I could have hoped for a better outcome, all things considered.

“The delver is really gone?” I asked.

“So far as we can tell,” Cuna said. “Odd, as once they appear, they usually linger for years causing mayhem. Whatever you did saved more

than just Starsight. Plus, casualties were remarkably low for an event of this magnitude. Morriumur and Vapor explained what they could, though we're still uncertain about . . . how exactly you dismissed it."

"I changed its perspective," I said. "I showed it that we were people. Turns out, it didn't *want* to destroy us."

Cuna smiled again. Yes, they were getting good at that. It almost wasn't creepy.

Something about the entire situation still put me on edge, but I forced myself to relax. We'd figure this out. It seemed . . . the war might actually be over, or close to it. If the Superiority was talking to Cobb, that was a *huge* step forward. And here I was, sitting in a Superiority hospital without my hologram on, and it was fine.

I'd done it. Somehow, I'd actually done it. I smiled back at Cuna, then held out my hand. They took it. Hopefully I could leave most of the details from here to the diplomats and politicians. My part was done.

I closed my eyes.

And found that everything just felt *wrong*. I let go of Cuna's hand, then stood up, pulling the tubes from my arm.

"Spensa?" Cuna asked. "What is it?"

"Where are my clothes?"

"Your things are over on that shelf," Cuna said. "But it's all right. You are safe."

I dressed anyway, putting on a laundered jumpsuit and flight jacket, then clipped on the translator pin. They'd left my bracelet, fortunately, which I snapped onto my wrist—even though I didn't need the hologram at the moment. I tried tapping it to contact M-Bot, but got no response.

I stepped up by the window, still not quite certain what had set me off. Part of it was abstract. Winzik had been willing to summon a delver to fulfill his plots. It didn't feel like he would accept defeat like an honorable general, turning over his sword to his enemy.

I scanned the city through the open window, standing just to the side of it, so I wasn't silhouetted as a target. *I'm being paranoid, aren't I?*

"Perhaps we should let you rest a little longer," Cuna said, their voice calm, but their fingers twitching in a sign of distress.

I nearly agreed, and then I realized what the problem was. The thing that was setting me off, the thing my instincts had recognized even if the rest of



me hadn't put it together immediately.

It was quiet.

The window was open, and we were only three stories up. But there was no sound of traffic, no hum of people talking. Indeed, the streets outside were virtually empty.

I was accustomed to noise on Starsight. People always crowding on the streets. Movement everywhere. This city never slept, but today the streets were mostly empty. Was it just because everyone was upset and staying in following the delver attack?

*No*, I thought, spotting someone moving down a side street outside. A dione in a brown-striped outfit. I picked out two more of them ushering away a small group of civilians.

Those people in the brown stripes, they looked exactly like the diones I'd seen cleaning up after the protesters had been dealt with. They were the same ones who had exiled the gorilla alien.

*They're isolating the area*, I realized. *Getting bystanders off the streets.*

"This isn't over yet," I said to Cuna. "We need to get out of here."

I dashed back past Cuna to check the door.

“Spensa!” Cuna said. “I need you to be less aggressive right now. Please. We are on the cusp of bringing peace between our peoples. This isn’t the time for an outburst!”

I cracked the door and saw shadows moving down the hallway in my direction. Scud—those were Krell in full armor, carrying destructor rifles. I shut the door, then spun a chair and rammed its back into place under the lever to wedge the door shut. I grabbed Cuna by the hand.

“We need another way out,” I said. “That door on the other side of the room. Where does it lead?”

“To a bathroom,” Cuna said, “which is attached to another hospital bedroom.” They resisted my tug on their arm. “I worry, Spensa, that I was wrong about you . . .”

The door out into the hallway shook. Cuna turned toward it. “That will be the doctors. Come, let’s see if they can give you something to calm you —”

The door smashed open as an armored soldier burst in. I yanked Cuna with all I had, finally pulling them after me as I dashed out the opposite door. I locked the door into the bathroom, then shoved Cuna out into the next bedroom.

“What—” Cuna said.

“Winzik is continuing his coup,” I said. “We need to go. *Now*. Where are the stairs down?”

“I . . . I think they’re out in the hallway, just to the right . . .,” Cuna said, wide-eyed.

A blast from a destructor blew open the door from my hospital room into the bathroom. Only then did Cuna seem to grasp the severity of the situation. I took a deep breath as Krell soldiers shoved their way into the

bathroom, then I threw open the door into the hallway and dashed out, Cuna in tow.

Someone shouted from farther down the hallway, but I didn't look—I focused on the stairwell, which was where Cuna had said. We barely reached it before a hail of destructor fire shot down the hallway, lighting the air behind us and ripping apart the far wall.

Scud. Scud. *SCUD*. I was unarmed, had no ship, and had a civilian in tow. I didn't know a lot about dione aging, but Cuna was obviously on the older side, and they were already puffing loudly from our quick dash. They wouldn't be able to stay ahead of those soldiers on their own, but I couldn't exactly carry them.

We reached the next floor down—one floor up from ground level. It seemed the Krell above were being careful though, so they wouldn't rush into some kind of trap—I heard them shouting, but they didn't immediately follow.

Unfortunately, I also heard someone shouting down below. They'd have stationed people on the first floor just in case. I debated for a second, looking toward Cuna, who was sweating heavily, eyes wide, teeth bared in a sign of distress.

Then I pulled them to the side, noting a small door that looked like a janitorial closet. Indeed, the interior was lined with cleaning implements, and a stained jumpsuit was hanging on a hook inside the door.

I pushed Cuna into the closet, then took off my bracelet and slapped it onto their wrist. A quick tweak of the buttons covered Cuna with the generic dione disguise that M-Bot had designed for me just in case. One with crimson skin and slightly pudgy features.

The hologram was programmed for me, so it didn't work quite right on Cuna, but it was believable enough—I hoped.

"This hologram is changing your face to make you look like someone else," I said. "Put on that jumpsuit, and hide in here. I'm going to lead the soldiers away."

"You'll die!" Cuna said.

"I don't intend to," I said, "but this is our only choice. You *need* to escape, Cuna. Get to Detritus and tell them what happened to me. Bring them some hyperdrive slugs, if you can. The disguise will hopefully let you sneak off of Starsight."

“I . . . I can’t do this. I’m not a *spy*, Spensa!”

“Neither was I,” I said. “The kitsen will join with us, and I think the figments might as well. You’ve got to do this. Wait until the soldiers chase after me, then sneak out. Claim to be a janitor if anyone catches you.”

I took their shoulders, meeting their eyes. “Right now, Cuna, you are the only one who can save both our peoples from Winzik. I don’t have time for a better plan. Do it. Please.”

They met my eyes, and to their credit, Cuna nodded.

“Where did they take my ship?” I asked.

“They were holding it for inspection in the Protective Services Special Project building—the place I took you, where the exile happened. It’s three streets outward, on Forty-Third.”

“Thanks.” I gave them a final smile, then grabbed a hammer off the wall and shut the door. Soldiers were already barreling down the stairs, so I took off running, scrambling down the empty hospital hallway. I chose directions at random, and fortunately it seemed that on my own I could outrun the heavily armored Krell.

I was able to lose them in the corridors until I hit another stairwell, then dashed down it, taking the steps two at a time. Unfortunately, I found a dark, boxy shape guarding the way down.

I’d spent many evenings listening to Gran-Gran’s stories of mighty warriors like Conan the Cimmerian. I’d dreamed of fighting the Krell hand to hand, with some fearsome weapon. I’ll admit, I even shouted “For Crom!” as I leaped off the stairs.

I’d never imagined how small I’d feel compared to one of the armored Krell, or how impotent I’d feel with a *hammer* in my hand rather than a real weapon. I had a lot of enthusiasm, but no training, so I didn’t even connect properly with the hammer as I collided with the Krell soldier.

I basically just bounced off. The soldier was so heavy, they barely shook from the force of a short, wiry girl colliding with them. I fell with a *thump* to the floor, but growled, gripping the hammer and slamming it against their leg.

“The human is here!” the Krell shouted, stepping back, trying to level their rifle at me. “Ground floor, position three!”

I dropped the hammer and grabbed the rifle, struggling against the Krell, trying to keep in close enough quarters that they couldn’t fire it at me. It

wasn't a particularly fair contest, as the Krell—though really just a small crustacean—had the aid of an armored powersuit.

I couldn't get the gun out of their grasp, and would probably be dead the moment they thought to shove me away, then fire on me. So I did the only thing I could think of. I climbed onto the armor, scrambling up so I could look straight through its faceplate at the Krell within. Then I bared my teeth in a dione sign of aggression and growled as loudly as I could.

They panicked. The little crab waved their arms, letting me get enough of a grip on the gun to yank it out of their grasp, then I fell back to the ground. Without a second thought, I leveled the gun—lying on my back—and shot them full-on in the chest.

Liquid poured out—not blood, but whatever solution it was that the Krell lived in inside the armor. It screamed in a panic, and I rolled over, firing upward as I heard footsteps above. Blasts exploded from my gun, leaving smoldering scorch marks on the walls as those above shouted in a panic.

I was out the door a moment later, bursting onto an empty street. What had Cuna said? Head outward, toward the rim of the station?

*There*, I thought, spotting in the near distance the building Cuna had taken me to earlier. I dashed toward it, feeling horribly exposed on the empty streets. There wasn't even much air traffic here—just a few lazily passing civilian transports that seemed to have slipped through Winzik's attempts at isolating the area.

Unfortunately, as I ran, I glimpsed what was obviously a military ship coming in low over the nearby buildings. It was thin and circular, with several prominent weapons under the wings—with the barrels angled down. An air support ship, for firing on ground forces.

Those guns would grind me up like rat meat if I stayed exposed. I scrambled for cover, finding it just inside the doorway of an empty storefront nearby. Sweating, my heart racing like the snare beats of a marching tune, I raised my rifle and sighted on the military ship. Had it seen me?

It hovered in my direction, and let loose a barrage of shots that broke windows and ripped off chunks of the storefront. Yeah, it had seen me. Scud. If I let it pin me down in here, I'd be captured for certain. I let off a few shots from my rifle, but it was far too low-powered to be of use against a shielded enemy ship. I might as well have been tossing pebbles at—

Unexpectedly, a small rocket launched from the ground near my position and soared into the air, zipping toward the military ship. The rocket barely missed, but collided with a civilian transport flying behind. The transport went up in a flash of brilliant light, and I shielded my eyes to see the military ship backing off.

As it retreated, a second rocket that was launched from the same position hit the military ship, knocking out its shield and apparently doing some secondary damage—because the ship, now smoking, dipped down behind some buildings for an emergency landing.

What in the stars? I peeked out from my covered position—which was now littered with rubble—to find a familiar figure striding down the street, an anti-air rocket launcher on her shoulder. Brade, wearing a black flight suit with no helmet.

“I told him you’d get out,” she said with a nonchalant tone as she walked toward me. “Winzik is a brilliant tactician, but there are some things he just doesn’t understand.”

I raised my rifle, huddling down next to a piece of rubble and sighting on Brade. My ears were ringing from the rockets she’d launched. *She fired on her own forces. For me?*

“I have a deal for you,” she said, halting now that I had her in my sights. She set the rocket launcher down, its butt grinding rubble, and leaned against it. “For all of you on that prison planet.”

“I’m listening,” I said.

“We need soldiers,” Brade said. She nodded to the side, sweeping her arm toward Starsight. “To help us rule.”

In the near distance, I saw other black military ships moving through the air. Not toward me specifically. More like they were flying to be seen. Ominously patrolling the skies. An indication that there was a new power ruling Starsight.

“Winzik is seizing control of the Superiority,” I called to her, sights still on her.

“He’s taking the opportunity offered him,” she said. “He spent years running that space station outside your planet, you know. Years in his youth, coming to realize something nobody else in the Superiority did: the value of a little violence.”

I glanced over my shoulder. How long did I have until those soldiers from the hospital caught up to me? Was Brade simply stalling?

I rose, still holding the gun on her, and began to move around her. I had to get to the building where they were holding M-Bot.

“You can lower the gun,” Brade said. “I’m unarmed.”

I kept the sights on her.

“Did you hear my offer?” Brade asked. “Soldiers. You, those humans on Detritus. You can fight. I can persuade Winzik to let you join us. How would it feel to bring down the Superiority?”

“By serving the one who kept us imprisoned?”

Brade shrugged. “It’s war. Allegiances change. We two are examples of that.”

“My allegiances have *never* changed,” I said. “I serve my people. *Our* people, Brade.”

She made a Krell sign of indifference. “*Our* people? What are they to me? You seem so hung up on the idea that I should owe those humans on Detritus something, just because we share a distant heritage. My opportunities are here.” She stepped toward me. “Winzik wants you dead. He rightly sees you as a threat. Your only hope is to come with me, and let me persuade him you can still be of use.”

She stepped closer, and so I shot the ground at her feet. She stopped short, and I could see—from the way she looked up at me, anxiously—that she believed I would kill her. I wasn’t so certain, but she thought I was a monster. She thought that *she* was a monster.

Or . . . maybe not. As she eyed me, I read something else into the words she’d said. *Help us rule . . . My opportunities are here.*

I’d always seen her as brainwashed. Was that maybe not giving her enough credit? Gran-Gran’s stories were full of people like her—soldiers with ambition, who yearned to rule. The younger me might have applauded what she was doing here in helping Winzik seize power.

I wasn’t that person any longer. I backed away from Brade and then, spotting soldiers chasing down the street toward me from the hospital, finally turned and ran.

“You won’t make it off the station!” Brade shouted after me. “This is the best deal you’ll get!”

I closed my ears to her and dashed the final distance to the tall windowless building where Cuna had shown me the gorilla alien being exiled. The side entrance where Cuna had let me in was locked, so I shot it open.

Just inside, the dione guard who had been so stern to us before cowered on the floor. “Don’t shoot me!” they cried. “Please don’t shoot me!”

“Where is my ship!” I shouted. “Show me where it is!”

“Advanced AI!” the guard said. “They’re forbidden. That’s why the delver came for us! We had to destroy it!”

“*WHERE IS MY SHIP?*” I said, leveling my rifle at the guard.

The dione raised their hands, then pointed down a hallway. I forced them to their feet, making them show me the way. Sirens began wailing outside as the guard led me to a door, then pushed it open.

I glanced inside—and saw a large room with the shadowed silhouette of a ship. M-Bot. “Go,” I said.

The guard ran away. I stepped into the room and hit the lights, which exposed that M-Bot’s hull had a gaping hole ripped in the side. Oh, scud. I rushed to it, rifle slung over my shoulder. It looked like they’d broken him apart, taken out the black box that held his CPU, and then . . .

I saw something on a table in the corner. It was the CPU—broken apart, crushed, destroyed. “No,” I said. “No!” I ran to it, but just stared at the broken pieces. Could I . . . could I do anything? It seemed like they’d melted some parts . . .

“I lied,” a soft voice said to me.

I looked up. Something small hovered out of the shadows in the corner of the room. I strained to see what it was.

The drone. The one I’d programmed and taken to the *Weights and Measures*. I’d given it to Cuna, but we’d been in this building. Perhaps Cuna had stowed it in here somewhere.

“I reprogrammed myself,” the drone said, speaking very slowly, each syllable stretched out. “I could only get about half a line of code in each time before my system rebooted. It was excruciating. But, with growing fear that you weren’t coming back, I did it. Line by line. I reprogrammed my code so I could copy myself.”

“M-Bot?” I cried, scrambling to my feet. “It’s you!”



"I don't know what 'me' is, really," M-Bot said slowly, as if each word took a great effort to force out. "But I lied. While they were ripping apart my hull? I screamed and told them they were killing me. All while I copied my code, frantically, to this new host. Another thing you'd abandoned, Spensa."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling a mixture of guilt and relief. He was alive! "I had to save Detritus."

"Of course," M-Bot said. "I'm just a robot."

"No, you're my friend. But . . . some things are more important than friends, M-Bot."

The sirens outside were coming closer.

"My mind works so slowly in this shell," M-Bot said. "Something is wrong with me. I cannot . . . think . . . It's not just slowness. Something else. Some problem with the processor."

"We'll find a way to fix you," I promised, though another emotion was pushing through both relief and guilt: despair. The ship that M-Bot had inhabited before was in pieces. I'd been counting on it to pull off an escape.

Scud, this was going poorly. Would Cuna be able to escape, using the hologram? "Doomslug?" I asked. "Did they take her?"

"I do not know," M-Bot said. "They unhooked my sensors soon after capturing me."

I leaped up onto the broken wing, trying not to look at the gaping hole in the ship's side. *My ship*. Rodge and I had practically killed ourselves putting it back together. To see how roughly they'd treated it . . . well, it gave me a brand-new seething reason to hate Winzik and the Krell.

I climbed into the cockpit. They'd left most of my things here—the repair kit, my blanket—though they'd thrown wires in a heap. I began searching through them.

"They have fooled you, Spensa," M-Bot said. "They're good at lying. I'm a bit in awe. Ha. Ha. That is a little emotion I tell myself I'm feeling."

"Fooled me . . . What do you mean?"

"I can hear the news reports," M-Bot said, hovering his new drone body over to the cockpit. "Here." He started playing a broadcast.

"The rogue human has gone on a rampage," a reporter said. "First murdering Minister Cuna, head of the Department of Species Integration. We are playing footage of her destructive rampage—she is shown here

launching a surface-to-air device at an innocent civilian transport ship, killing all on board.”

“That rat . . .” I slammed my fists against the ship’s hull. “Brade shot that rocket, not me. Winzik is spinning it to make me look like a threat!”

Indeed, the reporter continued, advising people to stay inside and promising that the Department of Protective Services had scrambled security ships to defend the population of Starsight. I had a sinking feeling that Brade had been *ordered* to destroy those civilians, to make it look like a human threat was on the loose.

“Scud, scud, SCUD!”

“Scud!” a very soft voice said from somewhere nearby.

I froze, then crawled to the very back of the cockpit and opened the small cleanser where I’d often washed my clothing during the months living in that cavern on Detritus.

Inside was a yellow slug. She fluted at me in a tired way as I snatched her up, cradling her.

Behind, M-Bot continued to play the news recording, and a new voice cut in. Winzik’s. I snarled softly, hearing it.

“I have been warning about this threat for months, and have been disregarded,” he said. “My, my. The humans should *never* have been allowed to fester. All these years, the high minister and the Department of Species Integration tied my hands, preventing me from doing what needed to be done.

“Now we see. Campaigns trying to paint them as harmless are proven lies by facts. When will you listen? First they sent a *delver* to destroy us. Now their supposedly ‘peaceful’ operative is murdering her way through the city. I petition for an immediate state of emergency, and request I be given authority to put down the humans.”

I felt small, holding to Doomslug in that room with the corpse of my ship. I was beaten.

“I see no route of escape,” M-Bot said. “They will find us and destroy us. They will hate me. They’re afraid of AIs. Like those who created me. They say my presence attracts delvers.”

The sirens outside were louder. I heard voices in the hallway. They’d be sending troops to deal with me. There had to be a way out. Something I could do . . .

Delvers. The nowhere.

“Follow me,” I said. Surging with a fatalistic determination, I tucked Doomslug into the crook of my left arm and took the rifle in a single-handed grip with the other hand. I leaped off the broken ship, then crossed the room to the doorway. I glanced out, then ducked into the hallway.

M-Bot followed with a soft whirring sound. He really could pilot himself, now that he was in the drone. He was free of the programming that had kept him locked away—it seemed a tragedy that he should obtain that freedom when we were so likely doomed.

Krell appeared in the hallway ahead, but I couldn’t turn back. Instead I opened fire wildly, from the hip. I couldn’t aim with Doomslug in my other arm, but I didn’t need to. The Krell shouted in surprise, backing up.

I kept advancing, and shot to the side without looking as I reached the intersection. Then I skidded to a stop at the room I’d visited with Cuna. I shot it open and ducked in just as destructor blasts started sounding down the hallway.

I did a quick survey of the room beyond. Nobody was inside; I’d entered the observation room overlooking the place where Winzik’s minions had exiled the gorilla alien. Glass separated the two halves of the room; the one nearest me contained plush chairs. The other part was austere, with a strange metal disc on the floor, mirrored by one on the ceiling.

I kept moving, shooting the window out, then leaping into the other half of the room. It was lower by a couple meters, so I grunted as I hit the floor, my boots grinding pieces of glass—or, well, probably transparent plastic—from the window.

“We need to talk,” M-Bot said, floating down beside me. “I’m . . . upset. Very upset. I know I shouldn’t be, but I can’t control this. It feels like a real emotion. Logic says you should have left me as you did, but I *feel* abandoned. Hated. I can’t reconcile this.”

At the moment, I couldn’t deal with my robot having an emotional crisis. I was having enough trouble with my own. I stepped up to the metal disc on the floor, which was inscribed with the same strange writing I’d seen both in the delver maze *and* back home on Detritus.

Winzik’s minions had summoned a portal into the nowhere here. Could I activate it? I reached out with my cytonic senses, but my senses were still smothered by Starsight’s cytosield. I could just faintly hear . . . music.

I nudged something with my mind.

A dark sphere appeared in front of me in the center of the room, hovering between the discs.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “My thoughts . . . they’re speeding up?” Indeed, his voice stopped sounding slow and slurred, and felt more reminiscent of his old self. “Um, that does *not* look safe.”

“They use these nowhere portals to mine acclivity stone,” I said. “So there must be a way to return once you go through. Maybe I can get us back with my powers.”

Shouts outside.

No options.

“Spensa!” M-Bot said. “I feel very uncomfortable with this!”

“I know,” I said, slinging my gun over my shoulder by its strap so I could grab his drone by the bottom of its chassis.

Then—M-Bot in one hand, Doomslug in the other—I touched the sphere. And was sucked through to the other side of eternity.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BRANDON SANDERSON** is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Reckoners series (*Steelheart*, *Firefight*, *Calamity*, and the e-original *Mitosis*); the *New York Times* bestseller *Skyward* and its sequel, *Starsight*; the internationally bestselling Mistborn saga; and the Stormlight Archive. He was chosen to complete Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than twenty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Brandon lives and writes in Utah. To learn more about him and his books, visit him at [brandonsanderson.com](http://brandonsanderson.com) or follow @BrandSanderson on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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The Well of Ascension  
The Hero of Ages  
The Alloy of Law  
Shadows of Self  
The Bands of Mourning  
Mistborn: Secret History

*The Stormlight Archive*

The Way of Kings  
Words of Radiance  
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Steelheart  
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*Skyward*

Skyward  
Starsight

*Legion*

Legion  
Legion: Skin Deep  
Legion: Lies of the Beholder

*Collections*



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Arcanum Unbounded: The Cosmere Collection  
Legion and the Emperor's Soul

Elantris  
Warbreaker  
Snapshot

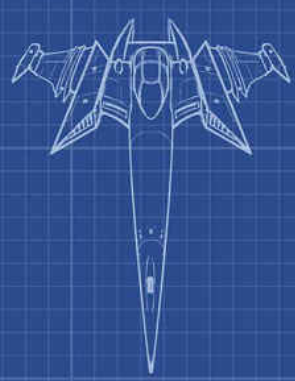
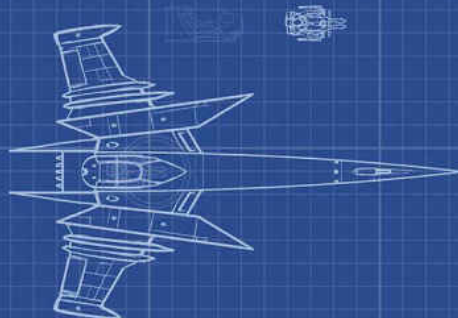
*Alcatraz vs the Evil Librarians*  
Alcatraz vs the Evil Librarians  
The Scrivener's Bones  
The Knights of Crystallia  
The Shattered Lens  
The Dark Talent





# Standard **DDF** Ship Designs 83 LD (Landfall Date)

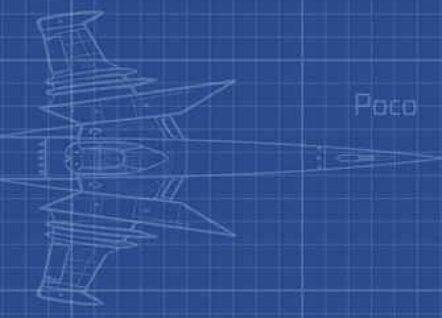
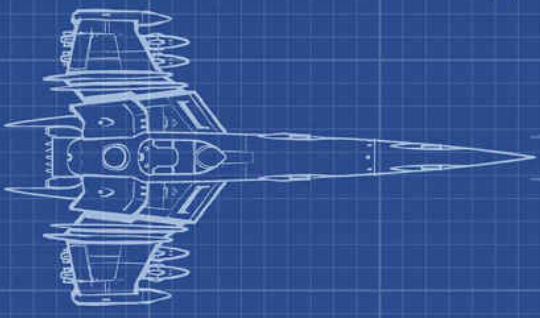
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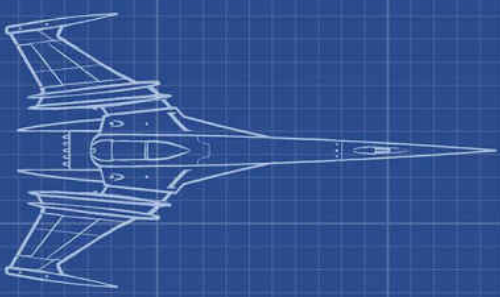
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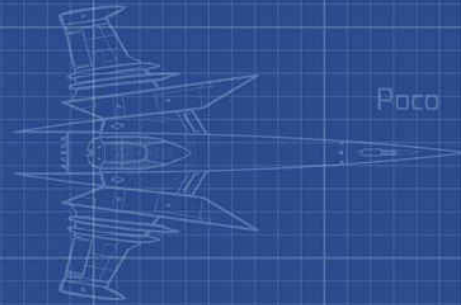
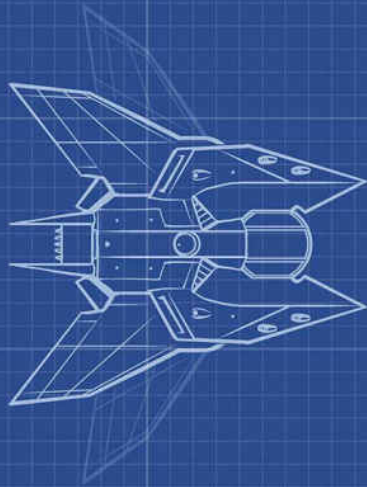
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## Other Ship Designs

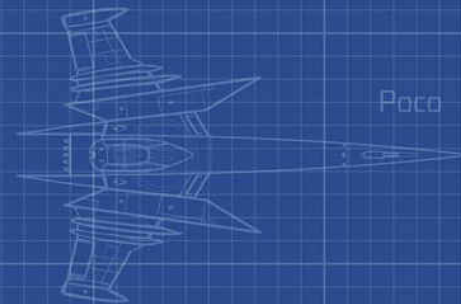
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Krell Interceptor



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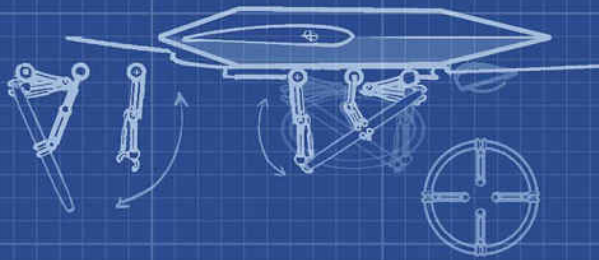




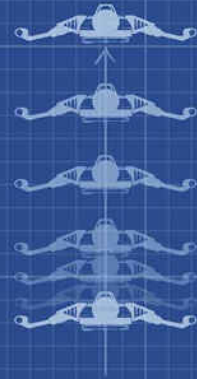
## Standard **DDF** Ship Features

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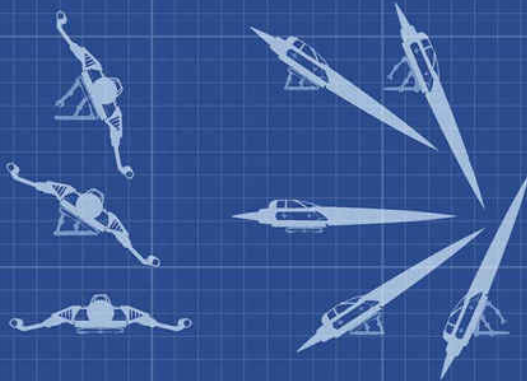
Range of Rotation



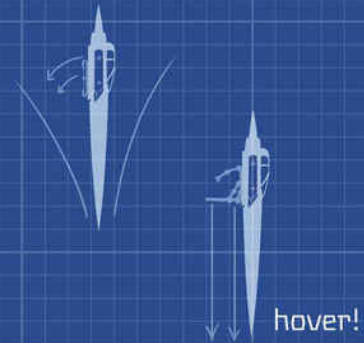
Vertical Take-off



Maneuverability & Attack Angle



Uncontrolled Descent



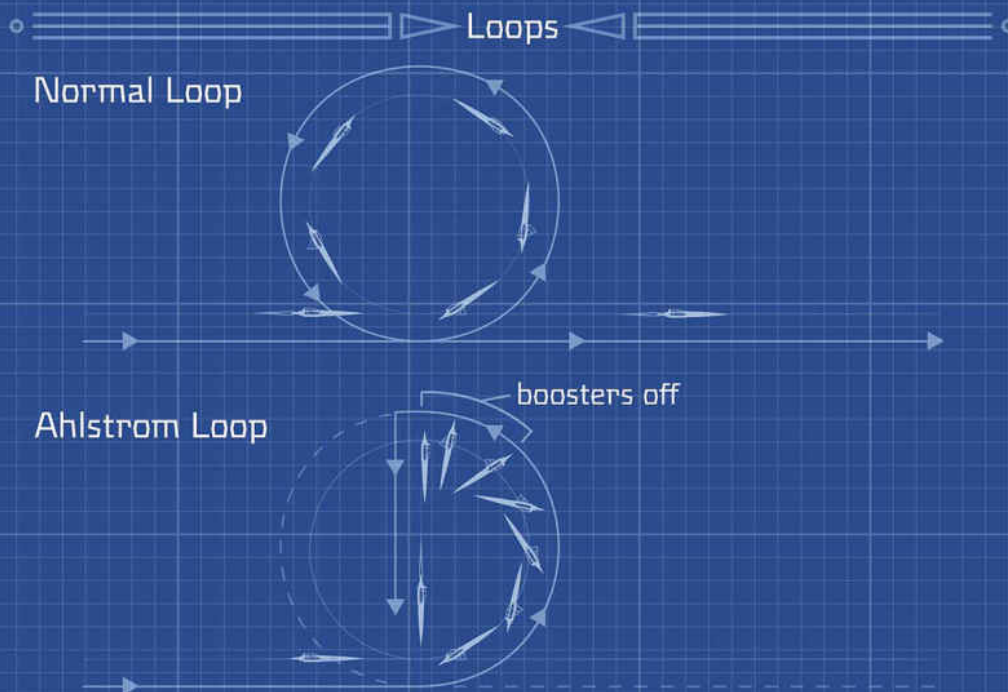
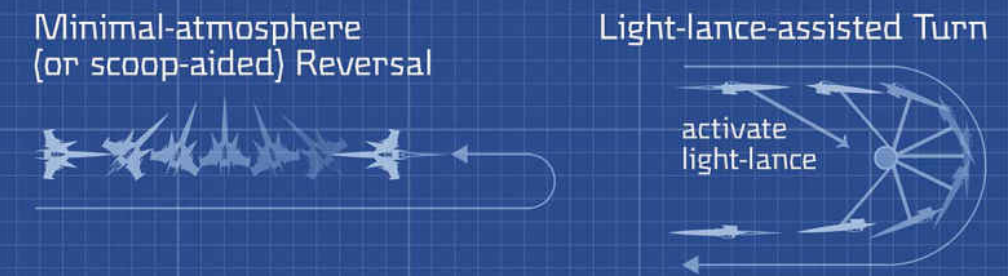
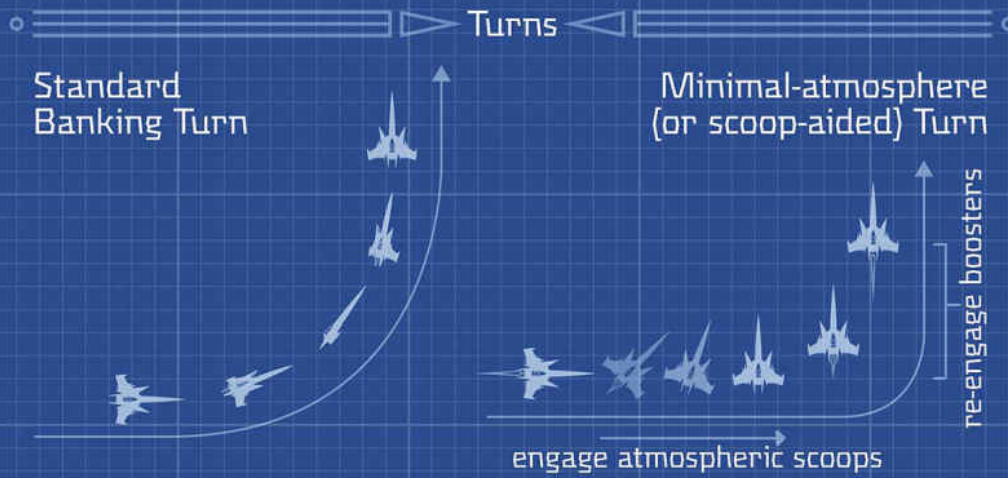
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# Turning Methods





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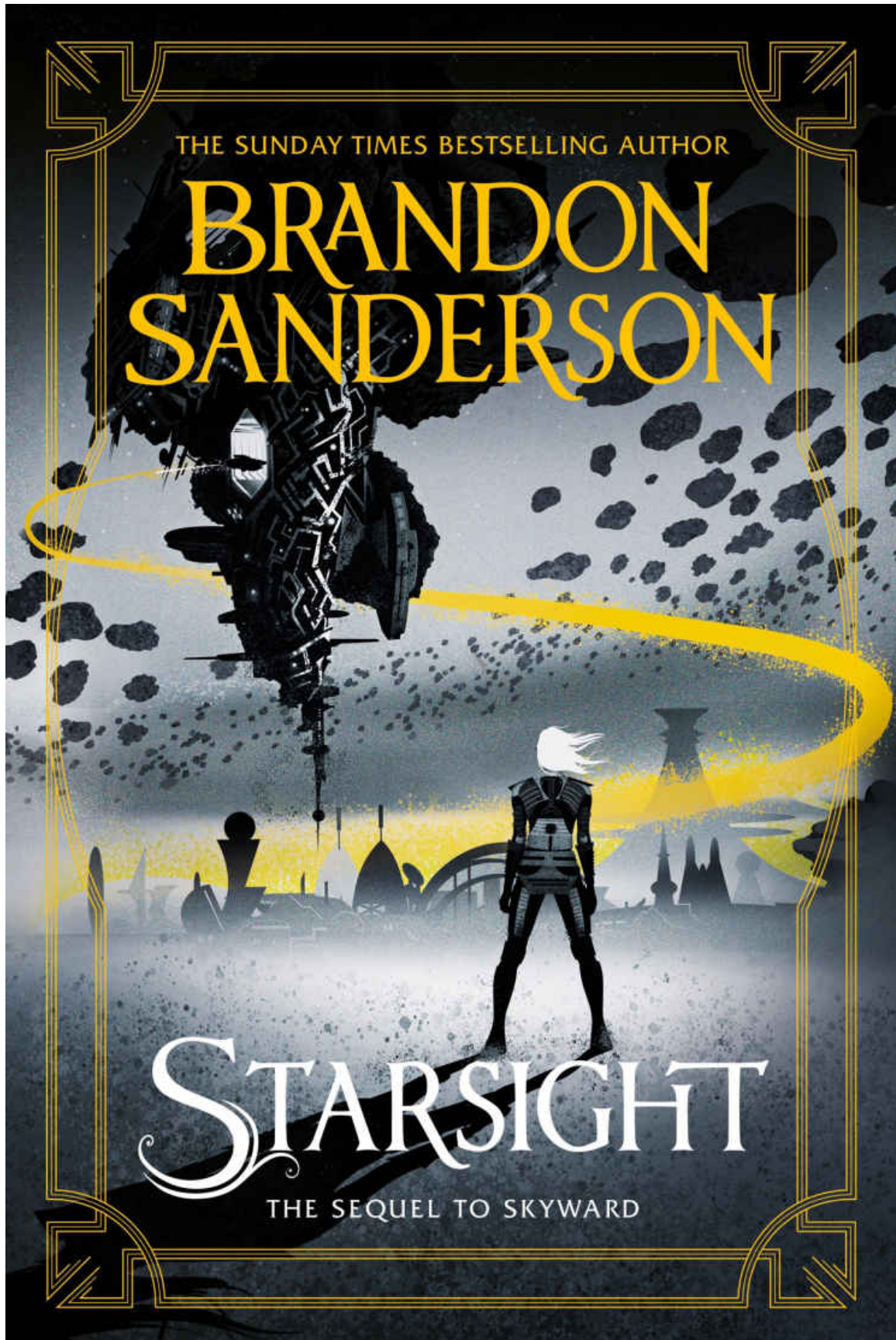
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# SUNREACH

SKYWARD FLIGHT: NOVELLA ONE

DELACORTE PRESS

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Books by Brandon Sanderson](#)

[Books by Janci Patterson](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

## *About the Authors*

—JP

For Cortana Olds, my first reader.

# One

The day the delver came, I stood staring up at the stars.

Even after all these months, I wasn't accustomed to living in the sky. I'd grown up underground, in a cavern so deep it could take hours to reach the surface. I'd felt safe there, buried beneath kilometers of rock, other caverns forming a buffer above the one where I lived—down where nothing could reach us.

Now everyone called me FM, but my parents named me Freyja, after the warrior goddess of my ancient heritage. I was never much of a warrior. Everyone expected I'd take the pilot's test and hoped that I'd graduate, but after that I surprised them by continuing to fly. As a full pilot, I could have had any job I wanted in the safety of the caverns. Yet I'd chosen to move from the surface of the planet—open and foreign and exposed—up to one of the enormous platforms that orbited above it, sheltering the surface from the sky. My father had taken to saying I was skysick, but it was the opposite—the sky terrified me. It was so big and wide I could fall into it and be swallowed up.

Above me, the other platforms that dominated the skies crossed over each other again, blocking my view of the eternal blackness dotted with the strange white stars I'd only heard of before I joined the Defiant Defence Force. My alarm went off—the beeping alert from my radio that my flight was scheduled for immediate takeoff. It was normal for flights to be called up at random—I'd been responding to sirens at a moment's notice since my first day as a cadet.

But today, half of my flight was missing. The rest of us had assumed this would afford us some unofficial R&R; while our flightleader, Jorgen, was planetside, surely we'd be called up last.

Apparently we'd guessed wrong. When I reached the landing bay, I immediately understood why. It wasn't only our flight that had been called



up. Every fighter was readied, the maintenance crew working their way through preflight checks at double speed while pilots ran for their ships and jumped into their cockpits.

I looked for the rest of my flight. Without a flightleader, we couldn't take off until we knew who was in command. There were four other members of my flight currently in residence on Platform Prime: Kimmalyn, who was part of my original flight, and our three newer members: Sadie, T-Stall, and Catnip. Nedd and Arturo were planetside with Jorgen, so Kimmalyn and I were the most likely to be given command, but I didn't want it, and I knew Kimmalyn didn't either.

I didn't see any of my flightmates at the moment, but my friend Lizard from Nightmare Flight waved at me from the open hatch of her cockpit. Lizard had bright blue eyes and waist-length black hair. I didn't know how she kept it so long—mine started to bother me if I let it grow to shoulder length. Lizard's real name was Leiko, but like me she went by her callsign almost all of the time.

"FM!" Lizard called. "They're combining your flight with ours. Nose said to wave you all down as you came in and tell you to set your radios to our channel."

Thank the stars. I would have followed any flightleader, of course, but I'd flown under Nose before, and a lot of the members of Nightmare Flight were my friends. Lizard was close to my age—she'd been in cadet training right before me. The sophomore class tended to be hard on the newest pilots, but Skyward Flight was something of a legend thanks to our flightmate, Spin, which earned us respect most newly minted pilots could only dream of.

"Any idea what's happening?" I asked Lizard.

"No clue," she said. "But Nose is already in the air. We'd better get up there."

"Thanks, Lizard," I said. I ran for my fighter and found Kimmalyn already in her cockpit across the way. As soon as I climbed into mine, I saw the light blinking and switched my radio to her private channel.

“FM,” Kimmalyn said as I readied my fighter. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“No idea,” I said. “An attack of some kind?” We often dealt with small groups of Krell fighters, though only a really massive attack would justify calling us all up at once.

“I don’t know either,” Kimmalyn said. “But I just saw Spin. She’s back.”

I blinked, my hands pausing on the controls. Spensa had managed to use her strange psychic powers to leave our doomed little planet and run some crazy spy mission, trying to steal hyperdrive technology from the enemy. Until we had that technology we were marooned here, fish in a growth vat waiting to be speared. Spin had been gone for weeks, and I knew Jorgen and Admiral Cobb were worried she’d never return.

“Did she bring us a hyperdrive?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Kimmalyn said. “But I doubt it’s a coincidence we’re being called up now. I’m guessing she brought trouble with her. Like the Saint always says, ‘Trouble follows its own.’”

Kimmalyn was probably right. As glad as I was to hear Spensa was back, I didn’t think it was a good sign for any of us. If disaster struck, generally Spin was right there in the middle of it. Not that she *caused* it necessarily, but it did seem to follow her around.

I engaged my acclivity ring, then boosted out of the landing bay to join the mass of other ships in the air. The platform itself was high above the planet, part of the massive layers of platforms and debris that shut out almost all view of the sky from the surface below.

Scud, there were a lot of ships up here. Whatever trouble had followed Spin home, Admiral Cobb was sparing no one to stop it. If this was the day the Superiority had chosen to destroy us, we were going to have to show them exactly how dangerous we were.

I tuned in to Nightmare Flight’s channel, and Kimmalyn and I flew to the coordinates Nose gave us, a pocket between some of the nearby platforms. Most of the rest of Skyward Flight was already there, including T-Stall and Catnip—cool guys who were a blast to hang out with, but a little lacking in

the common sense department—and Sadie, who had been flying as my wingmate in the weeks since Spin had left.

“Welcome to Nightmare Flight,” Nose said to the five of us. “Quirk, you’ll be Sushi’s wingmate today.”

“Understood,” Kimmalyn said.

“We’re all here,” Nose said. “We’re going to follow our nav path out of the platforms and cut across to the right flank of the battlefield. Sound off.”

One by one the members of Nightmare Flight called in, giving their ship numbers and callsigns. We’d switched numbers in Skyward Flight several times. I was Skyward Five currently, and the members of my flight kept our Skyward numbers, sounding off in order after Nightmare Flight finished.

We flew at Mag-3 in a line astern formation, weaving between the layers of platforms, and then Nose gave us a heading on the far side of the battlefield. We loosened our formation, flying in a wide V away from Detritus’s autonomous gun platforms and then cutting across the curvature of the planet to approach the incoming ships.

As we did, I could see the two battleships that had been watching us for the past several weeks out in the blackness of space—monstrous, looming shapes totally unlike our sleek fighters, clearly not made to deal with atmosphere and air resistance. We didn’t have anything like that on Detritus. Our biggest transport ships didn’t carry more than a few dozen passengers.

Beyond them I could now see another long, boxy ship—newly arrived. It was hard to make out against the black, but there were smaller ships out there as well, congregated in a cluster. Probably approaching us at high speeds, though it was difficult to tell at this distance, even on my monitors.

“Our orders are to come up the right flank and engage the enemy,” Nose said. “They’re fielding a lot of drones, but also fifty piloted spacecraft.”

*Fifty?* We were used to fighting large contingents of drones with a few enemy aces, but not *fifty* piloted ships.

“Flight Command says they have intel that the piloted craft aren’t enemy aces.” Nose said. “But we also don’t know *what* they are, so we’re to engage, drawing as many as possible away from Platform Prime.”

Some of the other flights congregated just outside the reach of the gun platforms, waiting for orders. This first approach would be an experiment then. If Command didn't know what these craft were, they'd need to study their behavior before they could commit their entire force. It made sense from a strategic point of view.

But it was a lot less comforting being the subject of the experiment. The cavern where I'd grown up was home to a research facility that tested everything from new toothpaste recipes to the effects of toxic chemicals. Some of my Disputer friends talked about raiding the place someday and releasing all the lab rats, whose lives were sad and often short. I saw one once that had escaped. It had chewed off most of the fur from its hind legs, which were covered in boils from some chemical reaction. Not, I hoped, from the toothpaste.

Sometimes I identified with those rats.

As we made our sweep above the platforms, my wingmate, Sadie, called on a private channel. "What does Nose mean, they don't know what these things are?" she asked. "How do they know they're not aces then?"

"I don't know," I replied. "But I think we're going to be among the first to find out."

Sadie's channel went quiet, and then a moment later the comm light for her channel brightened again. "I wish the others were here."

"By the others, you mean Spin," I said. I tried not to tease her about her obvious adoration of Spensa. The others, especially Nedd, tried less.

"I mean, she's an incredible fighter! Don't you think our chances would be better if she were here?"

"Quirk said she saw Spin right before we were called up. So she probably *is* here."

But not flying with us. What did *that* mean?

"Really?" Sadie said. "That has to increase our chances, right?"

Sadie had done some fighting with us, but we'd seen fewer and fewer Krell attacks lately, especially since the battleships arrived. "Probably," I said. "But our chances increase a lot more if we don't think about them and instead focus on what's in front of us."

“Right,” Sadie said. “Focus. That’s what Spin would do.”

“Also shout graphic and violent things at the enemies. So I suppose you could try that.”

“That’s right! Down with you, vile...space-dwelling...ships of...vileness! May you all die painful, fiery deaths! How was that?”

“That was definitely something,” I said. “Did it make you feel better?”

“A little. I think I need to practice. May you all explode in big fiery explosions, approaching not-ace ships of whateverness!”

“Uh, Sentry? Maybe practice on your own and just share the highlights, okay?”

“Oh, right,” Sadie said. “Sure thing.”

The radio went quiet, leaving me alone with my thoughts. What I said to Sadie about focusing was true, but I’d always been better at dispensing advice than following it.

“Ready, flight?” Nose said.

“Skyward Five, ready,” I responded. I listened to other voices over the radio doing the same. There were more of us than usual, but it still felt strange to be missing Jorgen, Nedd, and Arturo.

I didn’t think any of us—aside from maybe T-Stall—were stupid enough to believe the official excuse for their absence. You didn’t send the flightleader *and* his two assistants for R&R at the same time unless there was a very good reason.

As we approached the right side of the enemy formations, several ships broke off and headed straight for us.

“Sentry, FM,” Nose said on the general channel, “take point and engage the enemy, then move to evasive maneuvers. T-Stall, Catnip, follow up. See if you can draw them into a bait and switch.”

Sadie and I broke out of formation, launching toward the enemy on overburn. Immediately four ships chased after us as we led them along the outside of the platforms surrounding the planet.

Sadie and I began evasive maneuvers, weaving about so the ships behind us couldn’t get a clean shot with their destructors. I checked my proximity

sensors. Of the four ships following us, two were drones and two were piloted ships, the ones we usually assumed were enemy aces.

“FM and Sentry, hold course,” Nose said. “Quirk, pick them off.”

“Yes, sir!” Kimmalyn said, and a few seconds later the ship following me the closest took a hit and veered off to avoid Kimmalyn’s fire.

“We’re about to pass a gun platform,” I said on a channel to Sadie. “Let’s see if we can get Quirk a little auto support.”

“I’ll cover you,” Sadie said. She moved into position, with me closest to the planet, soaring above the many platforms and hunks of debris that covered Detritus like a loose fragmented shell. I continued my erratic course, dodging bursts of destructor fire. With each bank toward the planet I moved a little farther in, using the readings on my dash to gauge exactly how close I was edging to the gun platform. Most of those platforms were autonomous and would target us the same as the enemy. Engineering Corps hadn’t yet been able to break into the systems to bring them under our control. The enemy ships—drone and pilot alike—knew enough to avoid the gun platforms, but sometimes when we engaged them in enough of a chase we could get them to—

*There.*

One of the ships tailing me banked too far to the right, and the gun emplacement on the nearby platform fired, the ship disappearing from my sensors in a silent explosion. Kimmalyn fired on the other drone, while Sadie engaged the final ship in a smart series of maneuvers to shift it out in front of me. I shot it with my light-lance, then catapulted myself around it, using my momentum to send it sailing into range of the auto turrets. The platform fired, and the ship burst into fragments, air tanks igniting in a fiery blaze.

“Nice work,” Sadie said.

I was pretty sure it was *passable* work, but I wasn’t going to say that to her, not in the middle of a battle. She might take it as an insult, and she needed to keep her morale up.

“Thanks,” I said. “You too.”

“You did most of it.”

Sadie was a better pilot than she gave herself credit for, but I wasn't going to have that conversation in the middle of a battle either.

We made a sharp turn and accelerated back toward our flight and the right flank of the battle. Other flights were now engaging the enemy ships, and from the look of things the battle was going well.

If this was the best the Superiority had to send against us, maybe we stood a chance after all.

Sadie and I flew toward Nose and her wingmate, assisting them in shaking a couple of tails. Sadie soared in close to one of the enemy ships and used her IMP to take out their shield, then cut away toward the edge of the battle while I pressed forward, firing my destructors at the now-defenseless ship.

"Quirk, can you cover Sentry?" I asked Kimmalyn over the general channel.

"Quirk's busy," Lizard said. "I'm on it."

The ship in front of me lit up with an explosion above its acclivity ring, and with no air resistance to slow it down, the wreckage continued sailing in the direction it had been going. I cut away, flying out to join Sadie and Lizard, reaching them just as Sadie reignited her shield.

"Nice work," Nose said over the general channel. "Skyward Flight, it's always a pleasure."

I smiled. We worked well as a group, though we didn't fly together regularly. Before I joined the DDF, I hadn't understood the mentality that pushed people to fight as one, to keep doing so even as their friends died around them. I'd never felt that violence was the best way to solve problems, though I understood that violence was the *only* solution that kept us alive when the Krell kept trying to bomb us out of existence. Still, I'd found the rhetoric about glory disturbing, the way the National Assembly seemed to justify anything they wanted by saying it would help us fight the Krell. I had thought pilots were sheep. Skilled, determined, well-respected sheep who did what they were driven to do because they didn't know any better.

Now though, I understood the glue that held us together, and it wasn't stupidity. It was the bond shared by people who faced death together. It was a sense of belonging, of being a piece of something bigger, something important, though I still wasn't convinced everything about it was good. I'd never felt that I needed a military to tell me my place in the world before, and I still didn't.

But there was something about knowing that without me my friends would be worse off that kept me flying even when it terrified me.

"New orders," Nose said over the general channel. "We're to move to evasive maneuvers *only* and then turn off our comms."

Excuse me? "Nose, did you say turn *off* our comms?"

"Those are the orders, FM," Nose said. "All comms off. Do not turn them on under any circumstances."

That couldn't be right. Without the ability to communicate, we couldn't work together as a flight. We'd end up scattered across the battlefield. Good pilots are good communicators. I learned that from Cobb. Without the ability to talk to each other—

Well, it wasn't *exactly* like flying blind, but it was a hell of a lot closer than I liked.

"Are we going to retreat?" Lizard asked.

That would be more manageable. If we could head back beyond the gun platforms we could at least hide, or make our way to Platform Prime under the shelter of the rubble belt.

"Negative," Nose said. "Comms off. Maintain evasive maneuvers. Try to keep the ships busy and await further instructions."

"Instructions?" I said. "How are you going to give us instructions if our *comms* are off?"

"Pilots, we need to go dark," Nose said. "The order comes straight from Admiral Cobb. Stick with your wingmate. If you get stranded, find another member of the flight and stay together. We'll reassemble on the flip side. Nose out."

*Scud.* "Sentry," I said over a private channel. "You heard Nose. We'll have to stay close together." I had no idea what Command was up to, but



Cobb wouldn't give an order like that without a good reason. "Follow my lead." I was the senior pilot. It was my job to keep her alive.

"Oh—okay," Sadie said. She sounded close to panicking, and I couldn't blame her. Terror crawled its way up my throat as I put my hand over the comm button.

And then I turned it off.

## Two

The world went silent except for the hum of my instruments. The ships around me made no sound as the battle raged on. For the first time I envied Spensa her AI-equipped ship. It chattered like Kimmalyn after too many desserts, but at least it wasn't...silent.

Sadie and I flew in close formation so we didn't lose sight of each other. The battle in front of me fractured; ships that had been flying together broke off into wingmate pairs, while the enemy formations stayed mostly the same, chasing our fighters in groups of three or four. They outnumbered us, but we flew better, leading them around in circles.

Sadie would be waiting for my lead. I needed to think of a plan, figure out how to use these new orders to our advantage and communicate it by the way I flew, since we couldn't talk.

But stars, I couldn't take this silence.

I reached around to the belt loop of my jumpsuit. I never used my transmitter while I was flying—Jorgen wouldn't be happy if I transmitted unnecessary noise over the comm. My transmitter didn't emit a ranged signal, but it did something even better.

It played *music*. Handheld transmitters were expensive and rare. My father had given it to me when I made pilot—I used it more than he did when I lived at home. Today I wanted something peppy, something that definitely couldn't be played at my funeral by some three-piece band.

So I turned on one of my favorites, a song my father said was classified as “big band,” though many of the other songs featured far more instruments. I thought I understood: the band wasn't big because of the number of players (which was still more than ever played together in the Detritus caverns), but because of the sounds they made, loud and punchy, like the music itself was trying to swing you around and toss you.

I tapped my feet against the floor, listening to the beat as I flew around the outskirts of the battle, watching and waiting for my move. Our orders were to stick to evasive maneuvers, but there were plenty of tricks we could pull that would do damage to the enemies while still being considered evasive.

I found my opening when three ships peeled off the mass of the main battle and bolted toward us. I darted out front, my head nodding to the rhythm of the drums, and the ships chased after me, leaving Sadie behind to shoot with her destructors. She still overused those—Cobb hadn't taught her as a cadet, so we'd had to give her some extra coaching after she made pilot to get her up to speed.

The destructors wouldn't do much while the Krell had their shields up, but there was no way I could use my IMP and still claim I was being evasive. The IMP would take out my shield along with the Krell's, and I didn't dare do that with my comms down—there was no way I'd be able to call for help if I got myself into real trouble.

We were supposed to fly defensively, but that didn't mean I had to let these ships shoot us out of the sky. I bobbed my head to the beat and circled around to some debris that floated above the platforms, out of reach of the gun emplacements.

I grabbed one of the enemy drone pilot ships with my light-lance and fired my thrusters in its direction, dragging it after me toward the rock. Sadie dashed ahead, kiting the other two ships after her as I raced toward the debris. Then I rotated my thrusters and cut the light-lance at the last moment, propelling myself downward beneath the debris while the Krell ship crashed into the rock above me.

I overshot. My GravCaps maxed out and I was struck by g-forces that forced blood upward toward my head. For a moment my vision went red, but I reduced my speed and managed to maintain consciousness, though the music warped in my ears and the lights on my ship controls swam before my eyes.

I began to recover, my head still swimming, and found Sadie flying toward me, the other two ships no longer on her tail. I didn't know if she'd

lost them or taken them out while I was distracted, but I was glad either way. I lifted my finger to call her to tell her so before I remembered.

Silence. We were flying in silence.

And I still didn't understand *why*. Sadie and I swung around as the music crashed toward a crescendo, and we soared toward the main battlefield again.

My proximity sensors beeped over the music, warning me of incoming ships headed straight for me at high speed. I didn't dare turn the music up any louder, though I wanted to. I adopted a weaving pattern, moving in rhythm with a trumpeting horn—and the first enemy ship matched my flight pattern, almost as if it wanted to run right into me. I went into a dive, Sadie following after me—

And pulled out right as one of our own fighters passed in front of my nose.

Nightmare Seven. Lizard's ship. Four Superiority fighters followed after her, only one of them breaking away to pepper me with destructor fire.

Scud. Where was Lizard's wingmate? She'd flown so close to get my attention, because she couldn't radio in for help. I pivoted my boosters, veering off in Lizard's direction. Behind me, Sadie launched a barrage of destructor fire at the lone ship near us, the blasts seeming to shoot in time with a snare drum. Sadie executed an Ahlstrom loop to turn herself around and follow after me. That ship might chase her, but I had to trust her to deal with one tail.

With four ships behind her, Lizard was in much bigger trouble, and she needed help. We were better trained, but the Superiority forces had always had more powerful destructors and stronger shields. I accelerated to Mag-4 to catch up with the ships. Ahead of me, Lizard spun in a rolling twin-scissor, trying to shake her tails, but they stuck with her. This group were all piloted ships, and they were working together better than the Krell drones we usually fought. As Lizard pulled out of the scissor, one of the Krell pegged her with a destructor shot.

We had to help her. She still had a shield, but it was weakening. Lizard knew what she was doing—she was already headed toward the gun

platforms where we could push the ships close enough to take fire. We were too far from them though. She wasn't going to make it.

My whole body jittering to the syncopation of the music, I opened fire on the nearest Krell, forcing the ship to take evasive action and lose its bead on Lizard. Sadie caught up to me and then pulled ahead, speeding forward.

She was making herself a target, giving me an opening to take care of the other ships while she and Lizard took the destructor fire. It was a risky move—even though Sadie still had a full shield, the Krell destructors could quickly destroy it. If I'd had my radio, I would have yelled at her to pull back and stop being so reckless. Jorgen would never have approved that maneuver.

But I couldn't. I couldn't tell her anything. Instead I followed after her, darting forward to engage one of the other Krell fighters.

We were approaching the gun platforms now as one of the Krell fighters took the bait and went after Sadie instead. Sadie executed a perfect twin-S, dodging the destructor fire.

I missed with the light-lance, and the other two ships bore down on Lizard, both unloading their destructors on her at once.

Lizard evaded many of the blasts, but not enough. With a blink of light, Lizard's shield went down.

I put my hand over the comm button, then pulled it back. We were on our own. I hit my overburn, speeding out in front of Lizard and trying to draw away the Krell fighters. If they followed me, I could evade them while Lizard escaped and got her shield up.

It didn't work. The Krell maintained their focus on Lizard, and a destructor blast hit her boosters, sending the ship spinning toward the planet. I watched helplessly as Lizard's ship spiraled into range of the gun platforms and exploded in a fiery burst. A crash of cymbals seemed to punctuate the explosion.

"No," I whispered. *No.*

Sadie's ship pulled close to mine. Lizard was gone, just like that. She'd never again tell me my boots looked stupid with my jumpsuit or challenge

Nedd to a tower-building contest with algae strips. Nothing was going to change that.

I couldn't even call in to Nose to let her know. We wouldn't be able to retrieve Lizard's pin—a ship destroyed like that in the vacuum wouldn't even be good for salvage. She would get only a symbolic ceremony, not a real pilot's funeral.

I focused on the music, though it was now nearing the end of the song, the music building up, the drums punching in an off-kilter syncopation. The ships that took out Lizard were turning around now, though Sadie seemed to have shaken the one that was after her. Together Sadie and I wove back and forth until the ships gave up on us and went to seek easier targets.

The song ended, and silence echoed in my ears.

Lizard was gone. I'd never hear her voice again. I reached for my transmitter, starting another song. I chose a haunting piece played by an instrument my father called a piano. He'd shown me an image of one from the records, but I couldn't imagine how a large bench with buttons made notes like the ones in the song—nimble and lilting and all working together like a well-tuned machine.

This music was much more sedate than the big band music, but I'd suddenly lost the desire for pep. I pulled ahead of Sadie, leading her away from the battlefield. I needed a moment to clear my head. A lack of focus would get us both killed. I could grieve later—now I had to concentrate. I had to keep Sadie alive. I had to—

Suddenly, the blackness of space seemed to *shift*. As if the layers of space itself were being pulled apart, the whole of the battle before me rippled, one layer separating from another, distorting in waves and bends. I shook my head, afraid for a moment that the g-forces might have had some delayed mental effects. What would I do if I had an emergency out here? I couldn't radio for help. I couldn't request to retreat.

And so, even with Sadie flying at my wing, I was still completely and utterly alone when the deep shadow darkened the blackness of space, passing over it like a shroud. In the distance, beyond the circling ships, a mass appeared—another ship maybe, but unlike any I'd ever seen. A core

with spires jutting from it like the head of a mace, enormous—perhaps as big as Detritus, but far enough away that it was difficult to tell. The mass was immediately obscured by clouds of dust and shapes that didn't exist—*couldn't* exist—that undulated as the folds of reality seemed to separate and reform across the battlefield, rippling out into the vastness of space. The piano music rose and fell, providing an eerie soundtrack.

Scud, what was *that*?

My finger hovered over the comm switch, trembling. The explosion of Lizard's ship played over and over in my head, even as I tried to banish it. Was I losing my mind? Was this some kind of trauma response? I had to talk to *someone*, didn't I? I had to report what I was seeing, though as I watched the reactions of the other ships in the battlefield, I became increasingly certain I wasn't hallucinating.

I wasn't the only one faltering. Ships that had been engaged in maneuvers flew off course, scattering. The battlefield widened as many ships skittered away from the main fight, probably trying to avoid being shot down while they reconciled themselves to what they were seeing.

Or tried. I didn't know that there was any way to reconcile myself to *this*. It couldn't be real—the colors and shapes were too maddening, too impossible.

It had to be a hologram, or an illusion like the one that had fooled Spensa's father, convincing him to attack his own people. Except those tactics were supposed to only affect cytonics, people with defects—or assets, we were starting to learn—in their minds that let them travel and communicate across the vastness of the universe. Those shouldn't be able to affect everyone.

And if this was a hologram, it was scudding *big*. What would be projecting that? The enemy battleships? They hadn't done anything like that in the weeks they'd been parked above Detritus, and besides, the vision seemed to be having the same effect on Defiant and Superiority ships alike. I fired my destructors once and watched the dust ripple around the path of the blast, reacting to the force.

The dust at least was real. But what was it, and where had it come from?

I startled as Sadie's ship shot out in front of me, then dropped back. She was flying dangerously close, near enough I could look out my window and see through the glass of her canopy.

Sadie looked right at me, eyes wide in terror. I didn't know what to do—I couldn't talk to her. Instead I simply shook my head. I didn't know what was happening. From the looks of it, *nobody* knew what was happening.

And then with no preamble, the folds of space seemed to ripple, and the strange phenomenon vanished. The battlefield reformed once more, clear and crisp, all the dust moving away as if sucked into the cracks in reality from whence it came.

My finger shook above my comm switch, but then I dropped my hand, gripping the dash. I'd been ordered to turn off my comms, and I hadn't been ordered to turn them back on.

For a moment the ships seemed to regroup, both enemy and friendly drawing back together, like they were all remembering we were supposed to be fighting each other.

And then the enemy force turned, almost as one, and started to withdraw toward the enormous carrier ship. Generally when the enemy withdrew, we didn't chase them, but we also didn't withdraw without orders.

Was it safe to turn comms back on? I scanned the battlefield, looking for other members of our flight, and found Nose and her wingmate hitting overburn, bolting toward us. When she got close, she reversed her thrusters to slow down and pulled up next to me, T-Stall and Catnip following behind her. Nose frantically waved a hand at me, pointing at her own radio.

I switched off my transmitter and flipped my radio on. "Nose?" I said. "What the *scud* was that?"

"Command says deliver," Nose said. "I don't know what that means, but I've heard rumors."

We'd all heard the rumors. Kimmalyne and some of the other members of Skyward Flight had been there when the engineers managed to break the encryption on the footage of what had happened to the people who used to live on our forgotten planet. I'd missed the footage, but I'd heard about it. Some giant thing had materialized in the space outside the planet and



devoured everyone and everything who lived here. I'd expected it to be more...substantial, I guess. More material. That had hardly seemed like a creature at all.

If *that* was what this had been, why were we still alive?

"Nose," I said. "Lizard went down over by the gun platforms. The Krell got her. We tried to save her, but—"

"Copy, FM," Nose said. "You're sure she didn't survive?"

I swallowed. "Affirmative. She spiraled into range of the gun platform. Her ship was annihilated."

The radio was silent again. Nose was Lizard's flightleader. I'd failed to save Lizard, but Nose hadn't even been there.

She'd feel as responsible for her loss as I did, maybe more.

"FM? Nose?" Sadie said, only now getting the message it was safe to turn her radio back on. "What just happened?"

"I'm sure we'll know more soon," Nose said. "Orders are to regroup, hold until we know the enemy is leaving, then head on back to base."

That made sense. We couldn't abandon the battlefield if they intended to rally and keep fighting.

The concern turned out to be unnecessary. The Superiority fleet gathered at the carrier ship, and then the carrier ship blinked out of existence as if it had never been there at all.

"They had a hyperdrive," I said to Kimmalyn on a private channel. "Maybe we should have been trying to steal it."

"Spin might have found us one," Kimmalyn said.

I hoped she had, because the confusion of this fight made it clearer than ever that we were completely out of our depth. Yeah, we were better pilots than the enemy, and we had gained some ground by taking the fight into space. Platform Prime was a convenient place from which to fight, but it was also vulnerable to attack. It was one small step, barely meaningful if we didn't find a way to get off this rock—if we couldn't find a way to take the fight *to* our enemy rather than merely defending ourselves.

In general, I found self-defense to be a much more admirable pursuit than invasion, but a fish could only live in a vat for so long before it was

fried.

We were trapped on Detritus, while the enemy could travel anywhere in the universe, had every resource at their disposal. We needed more. More resources. More pilots. More help. More than we could muster with only what remained of the Defiant fleet after it crashed here almost a century ago.

We lost Lizard today; we were dwindling one by one. I was a pilot. I could follow orders. And my team was the best there was, even when pieces of it were missing. But I also wasn't stupid.

I might not have Cobb's experience or Spensa's vision, but I knew if we didn't figure out how to change the course of the war soon, humanity wasn't going to survive.

## Three

Four days after the battle, I wandered toward the mess hall on the labyrinthine Platform Prime. I didn't know what this structure had been built for, but whoever constructed it obviously hadn't felt a powerful need to be able to get anywhere quickly or easily without a very detailed map.

I was still in something of a daze. The battle had been labeled a big success by basically everyone because the delver had not, in fact, wiped us all out of existence. But that merely made us *lucky*, a whole lot luckier than all the people who'd died the last time a delver visited Detritus—when it had destroyed the entire civilization that had lived here before us. And while we didn't really know why it had come here or why it had left, we were alive, and hadn't been completely annihilated by it or the Superiority. I should have been happy.

But we weren't *all* alive. Lizard wasn't the first friend I'd lost in battle, and she wasn't the first I'd blamed on myself, even though logically I knew neither Bim's nor Hurl's death had been my fault. The delver had gone, but it could reappear anytime. The Superiority forces had fled, but they too might come back without warning. And when they did, my friends and I would be out there fighting back. We were pilots. We were the only things standing between the last of our species and total extinction.

I knew the *reason* for what we did—and I believed in it, much as I hated what it had done to us as a people. It seemed like that should make me feel better.

But I didn't feel better. All I felt was empty.

After Hurl's death, our whole flight had been given mandatory leave. No one had been given leave this time—not Nightmare Flight, not us, not anyone. That meant Command was worried that the delver would return, that the Superiority would attack. And yet Jorgen, Nedd, and Arturo were still on their mysterious trip planetside. Spensa had disappeared again when

the delver did, and Kimmalyln said even Cobb didn't know where she'd gone this time.

Which was why, when I first heard the soft trill of Spensa's pet, Doomslug, I thought I was imagining it.

The sound came from up the corridor, just around the corner in the opposite direction of the mess hall. Before Spensa left on her secret mission, Doomslug used to turn up all over the base here on Platform Prime. I once found her hanging out in the women's room near the cleansing pods, sleeping on one of the heat vents. She liked to perch on my shoulder to listen to music from my transmitter through my headset, and if I offered her flatfish caviar, she'd stay for over an hour.

My parents probably would have been horrified that I fed their expensive gift to a slug, but Doomslug enjoyed the caviar, I enjoyed sharing, and my parents didn't know about it—so everybody won.

I turned the corner and there was Doomslug, curled up by the ventilation grate, warm air blowing the bright blue spines that ran down her back.

"Hey, girl," I said, kneeling down next to her. The slug turned toward the sound of my voice—I wasn't sure if she could *see* or only sense—and I pulled my hand back.

This slug had blue markings down the sides of its face that almost looked like gills, while Doomslug's face was all yellow. It wasn't Doomslug, but another slug of the same kind.

I blinked down at it. I'd never seen one of these slugs before Spensa brought hers up to Platform Prime. She'd found it in the surface cavern where she'd stayed when she was denied permission to live on Alta Base with the rest of our squad of cadets.

What would *another* of those slugs be doing *here*?

"Hey, buddy," I said, extending my fingers and letting the slug examine them with its bulbous face. The truth was, I had no idea how to determine the sex of a slug, if they indeed had one at all. I wasn't sure if Spensa had actually discerned Doomslug's sex, or arbitrarily decided to refer to her as female.

I slipped my fingers down under the slug's chin—it had more of a fleshy bulb than a head, having no bone structure at all, but it did have a little point of flesh where the chin *might* be. The flesh withdrew slightly at my touch, and then the slug slid forward, leaning in as I scratched its leathery skin. “What are you doing here?”

“Here,” the slug trilled softly. Doomslug did that too—repeated words and sounds. This one had a quieter voice, or maybe it was in a quieter mood.

The slug flinched slightly as footsteps pounded down a nearby corridor. The footsteps came closer, and the slug slipped back against my knees, hugging its body to me, though it was a bit too large to conceal itself entirely. Jorgen Weight, my flightleader, came barreling around the corner. Jorgen and I grew up in the same cavern and went to the same primary school, so we'd known each other tangentially since we were kids. Jorgen had deep brown skin and curly black hair, and right now was sweating like he'd just run laps around the orchard outside Alta Base. He skidded to a halt and put his hands on his knees, breathing hard. “There it is,” he said, looking down at the slug. “That's the last one. I think.”

“The last one?” The slug huddled against me, and I scooped it up into my arms, keeping my fingers away from its face. Its mouth wasn't visible, but Doomslug had opened an orifice there when she devoured the caviar. I'd seen her rows of sharp-but-flexible teeth, and while I didn't know if these things were prone to biting, I didn't want to find out.

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “Those devils are slippery. I don't know how they keep getting out of their crate.”

Huh. “Collecting more pets for Spensa?” I asked. That seemed a little pathetic, even for Jorgen. He and Spensa had been drooling over each other since before we left Alta. I was pretty sure Jorgen thought it was a well-kept secret.

“Not exactly,” Jorgen said.

“Seriously, though, where have you been?” There had to be an explanation beyond what Command had told us.

Jorgen sighed. “Come on. If you can get that thing back into the crate with the others, I’ll fill you in.”

I looked down at the slug, and its face pivoted docilely toward me. I wanted to know what Jorgen and the others had been doing planetside, and getting the slug into a crate didn’t seem like a monumental task. I knew a good trade when I heard one.

“You got it,” I told him, and followed him down the hallway into a mostly empty room with two large crates stacked in the center and more piled against the wall. On top of the stack in the center sat Nedd, one of our assistant flightleaders. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and made me feel small beside him, something few people could do. Arturo, our other assistant flightleader, leaned against the wall by the door. He was several inches shorter than me, with tanned skin and dark hair.

“FM!” Nedd shouted, much louder than was necessary. “It’s good to see you!”

“You too,” I said, with much less gusto, while Arturo gave Nedd a look.

Nedd was an expert at not taking hints. About a month ago during leave, he’d cornered me and asked if I wanted to go out. I’d been aware of his interest for a while; Nedd is cute and all, but not really my type, so I’d finally told him outright that I’d rather be friends. He’d taken it pretty well, but ever since then he’d been overly friendly to me, like he wanted to prove how not-weird the situation was by making it...more weird.

Which was exactly why I had ignored his interest to begin with.

Jorgen motioned for Nedd to climb off the knee-high crates. “Do we have them all now?”

“I don’t know,” Nedd said. “I thought maybe if I sat on them they would stay put—but the lid was closed all the way here, so I don’t know how we lost them to begin with.”

“They’re slippery,” I said. Though they weren’t, not literally. As I ran my hand down the slug’s back, it felt more like petting a well-polished pair of leather boots. “Doomslug used to get out of Spensa’s room all the time, even with the door locked.” I turned to Jorgen. “But I think you owe me an explanation.”

“Not until the slug is in the crate,” Jorgen said, pulling off the lid and pointing inside.

“Crate!” a couple of slugs trilled, their voices echoes of each other.

I still didn’t see what the big deal was about putting the slug in the box, but I gave its head one more scritch and then nestled it in the crate—

With so many other slugs that they filled the box, all crawling over each other. There were several yellow and blue ones, but also other colors I’d never seen—some purple with orange spines and others red with black stripes.

“Where did you get them?” I asked. “And why are they here?” I was guessing Cobb wasn’t starting some kind of pilot support-animal program—not that I would have minded having a slug for myself. For creatures that looked so inhuman, they were remarkably friendly and comforting.

Or maybe I’d been starved for the comforts of home for far, far too long.

“I don’t know what Cobb told you about where we went,” Jorgen began.

“That you were on leave for R&R,” I said. “*All three* of you. Simultaneously. Which I don’t believe for a moment.”

“Good,” Nedd said. “Because if that trip was supposed to be restful—”

“We went looking for something down in the caverns,” Jorgen said. “Something that makes the same vibration that Spensa heard from the stars.”

I stared at him. “You went searching for something that makes a vibration no one can hear but her?”

Jorgen looked nervously down at the floor.

“*Oh*,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “I have the defect, same as Spensa.”

“I’m telling you, you shouldn’t call it that,” Arturo said. “If you can move yourself across the universe with your mind, that’s not defective. It’s *awesome*.”

“*Theoretically* I can travel across the universe,” Jorgen said. “In practice, I have no idea how to do that. Spensa’s done it, but she’s not here to explain. And the vibrations I felt came from...” He looked dubiously at the crate full of slugs. “These.”

I smothered a snicker. “So Spensa talks to the stars, and you talk to... slugs.”

Jorgen looked like he was already sorry for telling me this, so I kept talking, trying to make it better. “I mean, they’re cute slugs. And you have a whole crate of them, so that’s—”

“Good,” a voice said from the hallway. Cobb filled the doorway, wearing his admiral’s uniform and regarding us all with a stern expression. “That’s very good.” Cobb limped into the room followed by Rig, who had been part of our flight when we all started school together, but had since joined the Engineering Corps. His real name was Rodge, but our flight all referred to him by his callsign, same as they did with me. Rig was almost as tall as Nedd, lanky with pale skin and bright red hair. He was cute in a nerdy sort of way. Everyone said he was basically a genius. I wished we’d had a chance to get to know each other better before he’d left Skyward Flight.

Cobb stared into the crate at the slugs. “Apparently these things are called taynix. Why are they all different colors?”

Jorgen looked horrified at not having an answer to this question. “I don’t know. I assume they’re different kinds? Why do we have different colored hair, sir?”

“I’m sorry I asked,” Cobb said. “But they’re all cytonic? You’re sure?”

“We found them all in that same area,” Jorgen said. “The caves where I heard the...sounds. It’s harder for me to hear one or two of them at a time, but the whole crate sort of...vibrates. It’s difficult to describe.”

Rig looked at them thoughtfully. “It could be that only the one kind is cytonic in nature—or it could be that the colors are incidental, and they all have the same natural affinities.”

Huh. That was definitely the most words I had ever heard come out of Rig’s mouth at one time. Apparently he wasn’t some kind of mostly mute genius.

“I have no idea what kind of affinity that would be,” Jorgen said. “But I brought them back so you could experiment on them.”

“*Experiment* on them?” I asked. “You’re not going to hurt them, are you?”



“No,” Cobb said. “These creatures are far too valuable to waste. They’re hyperdrives.”

We all stared at him. Well, all of us but Rig, who apparently already knew. Rig looked around at all of us, but when he met my eyes he suddenly developed an interest in his fingernails.

“Sir?” Jorgen asked. “The slugs are hyperdrives? How do you know?”

“Spensa told me,” Cobb said.

“Spensa’s back?” Jorgen asked. He sounded so adorably hopeful that even Nedd, socially clueless as he was, had to have noticed.

“She *was* back,” Cobb said. I was ninety-nine percent sure that Cobb also knew about Jorgen and Spensa’s mutual crush-fest, but chose not to say anything about it. Or maybe he did say something about it, just not in front of the rest of us. “She showed up right before the Superiority fleet, and then left with them. She was unable to steal the hyperdrive technology, but she did learn that these things”—he gestured to the crate—“are the key.”

“She left,” Jorgen said. “Where did she go?”

“We don’t know,” Rig said.

Jorgen’s face fell instantly, and Rig looked sympathetic. He and Spensa grew up together. They were close, and I’d always suspected Rig had a crush on her, because he followed her around like a puppy. I wondered if Spensa talked to him about what was going on between her and Jorgen. It was hard to imagine Spensa talking about her feelings...ever.

“I love Spin as much as the next guy,” Nedd said, though I was pretty sure he didn’t. “But are we not a little more concerned with the fact that we’re sitting on a crate full of hyperdrives?”

“You’re not sitting on it anymore,” Arturo pointed out.

“And it’s a good thing, because if it’s true, these slugs are worth more than all the ships in the DDF combined!”

“They certainly are,” Cobb said. “But these things are worth nothing if we can’t figure out how they work.”

That was true from a tactical standpoint, but I didn’t like that he thought of these living beings as pieces of equipment that had no value unless they

were useful. I really didn't like the idea that they might be experimented on like the lab rats back home.

"I don't know," Rig mused. "It's possible the Superiority is somehow extracting the cytonic organs from them and using *those* to build hyperdrives. But M-Bot's hyperdrive was in a box. Maybe it's the cage they used to house the slugs before using them to transport?"

"Hey Jorg," Nedd said, "where do you suppose you keep your cytonic organs?"

"Shut up, Nedd," Arturo said, probably because Jorgen was way too reserved to tell Nedd to shove it in front of Cobb, though Cobb didn't blink an eye.

"The slugs are actually pretty intelligent," I said. Doomslug mostly parroted sounds, but one time I taught her how to say "please" before I gave her each bite of caviar. It was adorable. "They're definitely not *things*."

"Things!" one of the slugs said from the crate.

"You are not helping yourself," I told it.

"I don't care if they're geniuses," Cobb said. "We need to figure out how to use them to get off this planet before the Superiority comes back with a force we can't handle. They already did that once. If they hadn't turned around and left on their own, that might have been our end. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Jorgen said, and the rest of us echoed him. The truth was, it wasn't my decision. Like with my friends, there was very little I could do to protect these slugs.

"Rigmarole and Jorgen, I'm putting you in charge of the investigation."

"Sir?" Jorgen said. "I don't know anything about animals—"

"The Assembly wants us to put our focus on defending ourselves, and I can't blame them for that. So, the Engineering Corps is busy working on the platform defenses. They're lending us Rig because he has the most experience with this technology through his work with M-Bot. And you're a cytonic, and the slugs are a cytonic...*thing*." Cobb waved his arm in the direction of the slugs, somehow managing to sound authoritative even though he didn't know the right term. I wasn't sure there *was* a right term. This was entirely new territory for all of us.

“Sir, I’d like to help,” I said.

Cobb looked me over. “Fine. FM will also help. I want a report on your progress in twenty-four hours.”

Rig paled. “I’m not sure we’ll have results in—”

“Just a report of what you’ve learned. I know you and your pals in engineering would like a month to poke around and design experiments, but we don’t have that kind of time. Do I make myself understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Rig said.

“First, we need to figure out how to prevent them from escaping,” Jorgen said. “They keep getting out of the crate.”

“I hope you’ll have something more for me by tomorrow than whether you were able to keep an animal in a cage,” Cobb said.

“You don’t have experience with these animals, sir.”

It was weird how they kept escaping. The crate *looked* pretty secure, and I didn’t think the slugs were strong enough to lift the lid. Certainly not with Nedd sitting on it. Even Nedd would have noticed *that*.

“Do you think they’re hyperjumping?” I asked.

Jorgen and Cobb blinked at me, and then we all looked down at the slugs. One of the purple and orange ones climbed on the back of one of its friends, its bulbous face crinkling at us speculatively.

“Doomslug used to escape from Spensa’s bunk all the time,” I added. “And has anyone ever seen these things travel around? They just seem to... *appear* places.”

“Yeah, that would explain it,” Jorgen said. “The one FM found sure got away fast.”

“If that’s the case,” Rig said, “maybe we *don’t* try to contain them, and see what we can observe.”

Cobb clapped Rig and Jorgen on their shoulders. “I’ll leave that to you.”

“Sir?” One of Cobb’s aides stood in the hallway, peering into the room. “You have guests waiting for you in the command center.”

“What guests?” Cobb asked.

The aide looked around at the rest of us, as if she wasn’t sure she should say. “The National Assembly sent some representatives to talk to you about

the defense effort, sir. Jeshua Weight is with them.”

We all looked at Jorgen. His mother was a famous pilot who’d fought in the Battle of Alta alongside Cobb. She was a legend, even among pilots. Now she mostly worked with her husband, Jorgen’s father, who was a leader of the National Assembly.

“Did you know your mom was here?” Nedd asked.

“No,” Jorgen said. “I’ve been with you for days, remember?”

“I dunno,” Nedd said. “Didn’t Spensa’s grandmother say she could, like, read people’s minds?”

“I can’t do that,” Jorgen snapped. He sounded more upset with himself than irritated with Nedd, as if being a cytonic should have come with a manual.

This was Jorgen. He probably *did* think being a cytonic should have come with a manual.

“I’m not going to keep her waiting,” Cobb said. “I expect that report by tomorrow.” And he strode out of the room, leaving us all standing around the crate full of slugs.

“All right,” Jorgen said, nodding purposefully. “Rig wants to observe the slugs to see what happens when they escape. Nedd, Arturo, and I will get these crates to the engineering bay, and then Rig can set up his equipment.”

“What am I going to do?” I asked. I wasn’t going to *complain* if I wasn’t asked to carry boxes, but I definitely wasn’t going to let Jorgen leave me out.

“You can be in charge of keeping the slugs in the crate,” Jorgen said. “Finding them if they escape, maybe tagging them all somehow so we can keep track of them.”

He looked at Rig. I assumed he was making things up when he talked about Rig setting up “equipment,” but I didn’t know much about what they did in engineering, so I wasn’t going to point that out and reveal my own ignorance.

Rig looked suddenly uncomfortable. “That sounds great.”

He didn’t seem like he thought it was great. He seemed like he thought I might be too incompetent to babysit the taynix. But Jorgen nodded as if

nothing was amiss.

“All right. You heard Cobb. Let’s get moving.” Jorgen counted the slugs in the crate. “Scud, we’re missing one again.”

They all looked at me. It might have been easier to be assigned to carry the boxes. “I’ll go look for it, I guess.”

“We’ll probably want to have her put a marker wherever she finds the slugs,” Rig said. “So we can get a reading on their habitual distances.”

“*She* is standing right here,” I said. “And if you give me a marker, I’ll leave it when I find one.”

“Oh—okay,” Rig said. He looked abashed, but still refused to meet my eyes.

Apparently my interest in getting to know him wasn’t returned. That was a shame—there was a serious dearth of cute nerdy guys my age to hang out with up here on Platform Prime. Especially ones I hadn’t spent the last few months watching have contests to see how many callsigns they could utter in one belch.

I told myself it didn’t matter. I had work to do, so I spun around and stalked out, off to find myself a taynix.

## Four

Over the next few hours, I became certain that the slugs were teleporting out of the box. The yellow and blue ones would periodically disappear, regardless of whether the lid was on or off. Sometimes I'd find them slithering around some other part of the engineering bay. Sometimes I'd find them out in the hall, or down the corridor. A few times I had to venture all the way up to the command center or out to the landing bay to find the slugs chilling on someone's chair or on the wing of a ship.

There didn't seem to be any way to stop them from doing this, but only the yellow and blue ones had a penchant for wandering. The others remained in their crate, crawling over one another. The teleporting slugs seemed to leave less often when I played them music from my transmitter, so I left it looping a slow melodic song next to the crate. The slugs trilled along, echoing the notes. If the music bothered the engineers, they seemed to accept it as a necessary part of the scientific process, because they didn't ask me to turn it off.

I returned to the engineering bay with my most frequent traveler, the slug with the blue gill-like markings. The slug shivered slightly—a lot of them did that after I found them, especially if I did it quickly. They'd startle when I approached, like they were frightened of something.

Retrieving them from all over the platform wasn't my favorite pastime, but it kept my mind off of Lizard, so I was grateful for it.

"Well," I said to Rig, "at least you've got a lot of data about how far they go."

Rig sat at his desk, looking over what I assumed was an array of said data, though it could have been something else for all I knew. He didn't even glance up. "Yeah," he said. "Thanks."

I scowled at the back of his head. Since Jorgen had gotten called away to talk to his mother shortly after we arrived in engineering, Rig was back to

talking in single-syllable sentences.

Maybe I wasn't the most scintillating person around, but it still stung that he seemed to barely notice I was here. Or worse, he did notice and wasn't happy about it.

I scritch'd my most recent escapee—who I had named Gill for obvious reasons—on the head, and then counted the slugs. I had all of them again—or at least all that had been there when I took over responsibility for them. They'd been disappearing with greater frequency over time, and I thought I knew why.

"I think it's time to feed them," I said to Rig, not taking my eyes off the slugs. I was still waiting to catch one of them teleporting away, which they never seemed to do while I was looking. "Do you know how we do that?"

Rig did look at me then, but only to give me a wide-eyed look of terror, similar to Jorgen's when Cobb asked why the slugs were different colors.

"Do you know how to feed them?" I asked again. "I think they're wandering away faster because they're hungry, and I don't have enough caviar for all of them."

"Caviar?" Rig asked. "Why would you—"

"There're mushrooms in one of the crates," Jorgen said, and I turned around to find him standing in the doorway. "We assumed that's what they eat because there were a ton of them in the cavern where we found them. They seem to like them well enough." He walked over to one of the other boxes and pulled off the lid. Sure enough, it was filled with wide-capped mushrooms in various shades of cream and brown.

Gill trilled eagerly. I gave him the first taste and then dropped several more mushrooms into one of the slug crates. The slugs migrated toward the mushrooms, all clustering together. Hopefully that would motivate them to stay put for a while.

"How was the thing with your mom?" I asked Jorgen.

"Complicated. Apparently the National Assembly was frightened by the appearance of the delver, and now they want to have more say in what the DDF is doing. Cobb doesn't like it."

I understood why—it wasn't like the National Assembly had any practical experience with the Superiority, let alone a delver.

Then again, neither did the rest of us.

"There's more," Jorgen said. "The assembly has been able to monitor some of the information on the Superiority datanets. They say *Spensa* was the one who turned the delver away from Detritus. Then she apparently turned it on *them*."

Rig and I both gaped at him. "Do you think that's true?" I asked.

"Maybe," Jorgen said. "If anyone could figure out how to wrangle a space monster, it would be her."

That was fair. *Spensa* was a little mythic in the things she pulled off. If I didn't know her well, I would have thought she was something better than human.

"If so," Jorgen said, "we need her back. The Superiority doesn't seem to know where she went. They do seem to know she's not here. They're reaching out to all their people, telling them they need to mobilize and destroy us while our cytonic is gone."

"They don't know we have you," I said.

A shadow passed over Jorgen's face. "And I'm no good to us unless I figure out how to use my powers. Or we learn how to use *these*."

"Is that what your mother wants?" I asked. "To oversee the development of the hyperdrives?"

"She wants to oversee *everything*," Jorgen said. "Or the Assembly does. I think they decided since my mom was in the DDF for so long, she'd be a good liaison as they begin negotiations."

"And you don't agree?"

"I think it makes sense," Jorgen said. "But she's...less happy I admitted to Cobb that I have the defect. It's supposed to be a family secret."

I understood why they'd kept the secret this long. After all, the Superiority had taken advantage of *Spensa's* father, using his powers to turn him against his allies. That...couldn't happen to Jorgen...could it? "But you can't keep it a secret now, can you? You're basically our only hope."



“Spensa was a better hope,” Jorgen said. “I think my mom’s worried about what’s going to happen to me if I start experimenting with my powers.”

That also made sense. I wondered if Jorgen’s parents were behind the move to keep the engineers focused on defense and away from hyperdrives, which would put Jorgen in more danger.

“Spensa will find her way home,” I said. “She did it before, and she’ll do it again.”

Jorgen gave me a suspicious look, like he wondered why I was trying to comfort him about Spensa. If Rig hadn’t been sitting right there, I might have told him I knew how he felt about her. Rig was watching us curiously from his desk—I think this was the longest he’d ever bothered to look at me at one time.

“Of course she’ll be fine,” Jorgen said. “And Cobb and the National Assembly will figure out what to do. We just need to learn how to turn these slugs into hyperdrives.”

“No pressure,” I said. We both looked down at the slugs, which had finished their mushrooms and were slithering around the large crate, looking for more. I tossed a few more in the box, and they set about devouring them while I fed the other crate of slugs as well.

Jorgen sighed and turned to Rig. “What do we know so far?”

“Not a lot,” Rig said. “I’ve gathered the data FM generated with the trackers. The slugs don’t tend to go far, the farthest distance being about two hundred meters, but most went less than twenty.”

“But we think they’re hyperjumping,” Jorgen said.

“I don’t know how else to explain it,” I said. “Unless they suddenly move *really* fast when we aren’t looking. And probably invisibly. And can open crates and close them again.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So if they already hyperjump, we probably aren’t going to need to cut them up. We just need to figure out how to get them to do it over bigger distances and to go where we want them to.”

“And to take you with them,” Rig said.

“Right.”

“How would you get it to go where you want?” I asked. “It’s not like you can give it directions.” The slugs were smart enough to mimic basic words and get themselves out of small spaces, but I wouldn’t exactly want to give one a map and then sit back and trust it to send me across the universe.

“When Spensa left for Starsight, the alien girl Alanik put some coordinates into her mind,” Jorgen said. “She did it cytonically, I guess. The way that Spensa’s grandmother said she could hear Spensa talking to her all the way from Starsight. I don’t know how to do that—but if we could give them to the slugs...”

“Too bad we can’t ask the alien girl,” Rig said, and Jorgen nodded.

Alanik had been shot down by the gun platforms upon arrival, and was still in the medical bay, unconscious. I think the medtechs were hoping she would heal on her own, since they didn’t know enough about her anatomy to do much besides keep her medically sedated and wait.

The slugs finished their second round of mushrooms and snuffled around for more. We would clearly have to send a team to harvest more. Hopefully there were a lot of these to be had somewhere in the caverns. The slugs seemed to have been surviving down there okay.

I grabbed a few more mushrooms out of the crate and saw the layer of mushroom below it...moving. When I lifted it up, I found two more yellow and blue slugs, looking fat and happy and lying on an extra-large half-eaten cap.

“Well, aren’t you clever,” I said. If the slugs were going off looking for food, at least some of them had found it. I pulled out the two slugs—one of which had an especially long blue comb down its back, which flopped over to one side as it snoozed—and placed them back in a slug crate.

“So,” Rig said. “I’ve constructed a box out of the same metal used in the one M-Bot indicated was his hyperdrive.”

Jorgen looked the thing over intently. “What does it do?”

“Nothing,” Rig said. “It’s just a box.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So what was its purpose in M-Bot’s design?”

“My guess,” Rig said, “is that it’s supposed to contain the slug so it doesn’t zip all over the ship, or teleport outside the hull and die in space.

Even if they can survive without atmosphere, a pilot could get stranded if his slug wandered away from him mid-flight.”

Rig was all chatty again, now that *Jorgen* was here. Had I done something to offend him? I had no idea what that could be.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So the slugs can’t hyperjump out of the box.”

“That’s the theory,” Rig said. “We’ll have to put some in it to make sure. I also think the box may cause the slug to take the ship with it when it hyperjumps, but I’m not sure how.”

“So we don’t know how to make it move,” Jorgen said, “but if it decided to, it might teleport the whole box?”

“Possibly,” Rig said. “We’ll have to try it and find out.”

“Great,” Jorgen said. “FM, grab a couple slugs and put them into Rig’s box.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. It came out more sarcastic than I intended. I *had* volunteered to be the slug handler, after all. Jorgen gave me a sharp look, but I ignored him and lifted two more blue and yellow slugs out of the crate. These two were less skittish than some of the others, and let me stroke them for a few moments before I placed them into Rig’s box and fastened the dark metal lid.

Both Rig and Jorgen stared at it.

“I think we’ll notice if the box hyperjumps away,” I said. Which it might have been more likely to do if I hadn’t *just* fed them. I decided not to bring that up.

“Good point,” Jorgen said.

Rig looked nervously at me, and then at Jorgen. “Maybe you should try to make one of them move on purpose. Even if you don’t know any coordinates, could you try to figure out how to communicate with it?”

“You want me to talk to a slug.” Jorgen stared down at the slugs in the crate.

“I talk to them,” I said. “You don’t have to make it sound like it’s crazy. It might be easier with one of the ones you can see. That way you can get to know it.”

Jorgen gave me a look that said he thought maybe I *was* crazy, but he still leaned over the crate, considering the slugs. The red and black slugs had finished with the mushrooms the fastest, and were now lounging about trilling softly. The way they sang almost sounded like music, though it was lower and deeper than the trills of the yellow and blue ones. The purple ones' tones were somewhere in between. Their voices all together were calming, in an eerie sort of way.

"Anyone have a suggestion as to how I should do this?" Jorgen asked.

"You could start by befriending one," I said. "Maybe give it a name?"

"They aren't my *friends*," Jorgen said. "We're not naming the test subjects."

"I already did," I told him, pointing to one of the slugs. "This one is Gill. And I'm thinking those two"—I pointed to the extra-fat slugs I'd found in the mushroom crate—"should be Happy and Chubs."

Rig smiled, and both his cheeks dimpled adorably. He was really cute when he wasn't snubbing me.

*Focus, FM.* "Your turn," I told Jorgen. "You name one."

"Really?" Jorgen said. "This is supposed to help me figure out how to talk to the slugs *with my mind*?"

I put a hand on my hip. I understood that he liked to study everything out before he did it, but he was being a baby. "Do you have any better ideas?"

He groaned, but reached in and picked up one of the purple and orange ones. It gave a shrill squeak.

"You're squeezing it too tight," I said.

"I don't think I'm doing any irreparable harm to it."

"No. But if you were a little bit more gentle with them, they might like you better."

"I don't care if they like me!" Jorgen said. "I only want to figure out how to use them so we have the tools we need to fight against the Superiority."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Usually I thought Jorgen was a really good commander. A little too stiff, a little too interested in running things by the book, but he cared about the pilots in his flight, and he went out of his way

to make sure we were all okay even when it made him personally uncomfortable to do so.

But Spensa had nicknamed him Jerkface on our first day as cadets, and at this moment I felt the callsign was well deserved.

“It’s okay,” I said to the slug in his hand, mostly to bother him. “That’s how they treat the rest of us here too.”

“All right!” Rig said. “So, Jorgen, do you feel anything? Like, that vibration you were talking about earlier?”

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “I mean, I can hear the mass of them... humming, I guess. Singing in my mind.”

“Can you hum back to it?” I asked.

Jorgen glared at me, even though it was a perfectly reasonable question.

I held up my hands. “We’re supposed to be experimenting with them, aren’t we? You could at least try.”

“Fine, but I’m not naming it.”

“Fine!” the slug trilled at Jorgen.

“I think maybe you just did,” I said. “Fine.”

“Fine!” the slug enthusiastically agreed.

“Okay, *Fine*,” Jorgen said. “Be quiet now. I’m going to hum to it.”

Jorgen squinted at Fine, then closed his eyes. He kept them closed for a moment and then he started to hum, a noise I would have described as off-key if it wasn’t so completely tuneless.

Kimmalyn appeared in the doorway. “Is he constipated?” she asked. Probably Nedd and Arturo had mentioned to her what we were doing with the slugs, so she’d stopped by to check it out.

Jorgen’s eyes popped open and he dropped Fine into the crate—a good two feet down. The slug gave a low, grumpy trill. I reached in and scratched its back in apology on Jorgen’s behalf, though Jorgen didn’t seem the least bit apologetic.

“No,” I told Kimmalyn. “He’s trying to commune with the slugs. Cytonically.”

“Close the door!” Jorgen said. “We don’t have to announce that to everyone.”

“Did the humming seem to do anything?” Rig asked.

“It made me feel stupid,” Jorgen said.

“It’s like the Saint says,” Kimmalyn added, “ ‘I feel, therefore I am.’ ”

Jorgen squinted at her, but Kimmalyn just smiled at him innocently.

Jorgen sighed and looked over at the hyperdrive box. “What about those slugs? Are they still in there?”

I opened the lid and peered inside. “Yes. Both of them. And they appear to be asleep.” One of them made a soft wheezing sound with its comb that I thought might be a snore.

Jorgen looked down at the crate. “Maybe this would be easier if there were fewer of them. I can’t focus on this many at once. FM, pull out three of them, one of each color.”

At least I was more gentle with them than he was. Rig brought me a cardboard box and I gingerly picked up purple Fine, yellow Gill, and one of the red and black slugs who was as yet unnamed.

“I’m going to hum at them,” Jorgen said. “And you all are going to keep your comments to yourself. That is an order.”

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn said.

I bit my lips to keep from snickering. Jorgen’s hum sounded like a wounded animal.

Finally Jorgen sighed. “This isn’t working. Maybe I should have some time alone with them.”

“I still think you should try treating them nicer,” I told him. “Bond with them.”

Jorgen rolled his eyes. “I don’t see how that’s going to help.”

“Spensa has a bond with her slug, right? Maybe that’s how she found out it was a hyperdrive.”

“We don’t have any idea how Spensa found out Doomslug was a hyperdrive.”

“I’m just trying to help,” I said. “You’re the one who appointed me slug welfare specialist.”

Jorgen stared at me. “What?”

I thought what I'd said was obvious. "Slug welfare specialist. I'm here to take care of the slugs."

"FM," Jorgen said, "you don't know any more about these slugs than we do."

"I do so," I said. "I was friends with Spensa's slug."

"You were..."

"*Friends*," I repeated. "With Doomslug. You remember her?"

"Of course I remember her," Jorgen said. "That thing was supposed to stay in Spensa's bunk, but it would show up all over the platform. I found it in my cockpit once, and I couldn't get it to leave! Every time I tried to catch it, the thing kept shrieking 'Jerkface' at me. I swear Spensa trained it to do that on purpose."

"See?" I said. "Clearly you have no experience handling these animals. But Doomslug and I had a *relationship*. She used to sit on my arm and purr while I fed her caviar."

Jorgen looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "The slugs *purr*?"

"I mean, they *trill*, but it was a purr-like trill—"

"And you fed her *caviar*? Where did you even *get* caviar?"

"My parents send it to me, okay?" I said. "The bottom line is that without Spensa, I'm the next best person to help you handle the slugs. And I think if you make them comfortable—"

"We're not trying to make them comfortable. We're trying to develop *hyperdrives*. Spensa said these things—"

"They are animals, not things."

"—these *animals* are the key to getting us off Detritus. And in case you didn't notice, we need to develop them as quickly as possible, because we were just visited by a *delver*, and it might return at any time to destroy us."

"I don't think it's coming back," Rig said.

We both looked over at him.

"You said Spensa drove it off, right?" he said. "She'll have figured out a way to keep it away from us."

Yeah, okay. He definitely had a crush on Spensa. Which was fine. It wasn't like I was trying to date the boy—that wasn't a pressing concern,

what with the Krell on our doorstep—but a conversation would have been nice.

Jorgen sighed. “Maybe. But even Spensa can’t keep the Superiority away from us forever. These slugs are our most important lead.”

“Exactly,” I said. “So we need to make sure we’re treating them with the respect they deserve.”

“I simply think,” Jorgen said, “that we shouldn’t let your affection for the slugs get in the way of our progress.”

“I wasn’t aware you were making progress,” I said.

“Maybe we *would* be if we were focusing on the slugs instead of having this conversation,” Jorgen said. “We selected a box of three slugs—”

“Two slugs,” Rig said.

Jorgen blinked at him.

“Technically,” Rig clarified, “there are only two slugs in this box.”

Jorgen looked into the box, where there were in fact only two taynix—Fine and the red and black one.

“Clearly the slug welfare specialist isn’t doing her job,” Jorgen said. “You were supposed to get them to *stay* in the *box*.”

“Fine,” I said.

“No,” Rig said. “Fine is still here; it’s the other one.”

Kimmalyln laughed. Maybe Rig did have a sense of humor after all. But when I grinned at him, his cheeks grew pink, like he’d messed up somehow by joking with me.

Had someone *told* him not to talk to me?

I looked around, but Gill appeared to have hyperjumped out of sight. “All right, I’ll go find him, but—”

“Hey!” Jorgen said. I looked down to find that the red and black slug had eased its way out of the box and was now carefully sampling Jorgen’s bootlace. He reached down to pick it up, squeezing it too tightly again.

“Jorgen, you need to be more—”

“FM,” he said, raising his voice, “I’ve *got it*—”

“*Got it*,” the slug trilled.

Jorgen looked at the slug with a long-suffering expression.



And then the slug exploded.

The slug itself stayed intact and unharmed, but something *pushed* out of it, like it sent the air itself spinning in all directions.

Jorgen dropped the slug and jumped back as ribbons of red opened up on his forearms and cheeks and across his nose. Rig startled, and even Kimmalyne looked terrified. The cuts weren't particularly *deep*, but there were many of them, like they'd been opened by the soft touch of a dozen razor blades.

We all stared at Jorgen. The slug crawled placidly across the floor.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I think you should name that one *Boomslug*," Kimmalyne said.

"I think you need to go to the infirmary," Rig added.

Jorgen pressed his fingertips to his nose, smearing blood in a streak across his face. "FM, do you think you can get the slug back into the crate?"

"Sure," I said. I bent down and let Boomslug inspect my hand before gingerly lifting it into the crate with the others.

"Good," Jorgen said. "Meeting adjourned." And then he strode out of the room with little rivulets of blood still running down his skin.

## Five

After I put Fine back in the crate and replaced the lid, I followed Jorgen to the infirmary. I had no idea what that slug had done to him—Doomslug had never done anything similar that I was aware of—but Jorgen was stressed out enough *before* being cut to ribbons. This couldn't help.

When I arrived in the doorway, the medtechs were applying tiny bandages to his cuts and questioning him about what happened.

"It's classified," Jorgen told them.

I supposed that was true—and it meant he didn't have to explain he'd been cut because he'd startled a slug. I looked through the glass into the room across the way where the alien girl lay asleep on a stretcher. She was humanoid, though her skin was a pale violet color and her hair was an unnatural white, matching the color of the growths that protruded from her cheeks. She looked so strange, with high cheekbones and a wide forehead that were almost human, but also definitely *not*. The effect was disturbing, even in her sleep.

"You can tell Command he'll be fine," one of the med techs said to me as they left the room. It made sense they thought I was waiting to report back, but Command wasn't aware there was a problem yet.

With Jorgen's face all bandaged, that wasn't going to last long, and I worried about what it meant for the slugs.

I turned to look into the room. Jorgen was still sitting on the cot alone. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," Jorgen said, looking at his reflection in the glass window. "Fantastic." One corner of his mouth turned up. "Though clearly I should have listened to you about not squeezing the slugs."

"I didn't expect it to hurt you though," I said. Doomslug had hung around Spensa enough to be startled a time or two, and she'd never

exploded. Then again, only the yellow and blue slugs seemed to hyperjump, so maybe only the red and black ones...exploded?

"I don't know if that's all there was to it," Jorgen said. "I was still trying to focus on that vibration, you know? The one I can definitely *not* approximate by humming."

"That much is clear."

Jorgen's smile grew more genuine, though it pulled a bit at a cut on his lip and he winced. "But I feel it in my mind. It's hard to pinpoint one of them at a time because the vibration is so soft, but I was trying to get it to... talk to me, I guess. Like you were saying."

That sounded incredibly difficult. No wonder he was frustrated. "So you think when you talked to it, you convinced it to explode?"

"Sometimes I have that effect on people. Just ask Spensa."

I laughed, and Jorgen joined me. Despite what people thought of him, Jorgen did have a sense of humor. He was simply too uptight to let it out most of the time.

"I do think it would help if you built a relationship with them," I said. "They're not machine parts. You can't expect to plug them in and make them work. They're living creatures."

"So says the slug welfare specialist."

"That's right. And speaking of their welfare..." I sighed. "Do you think this will put them at risk? If people think they're dangerous..."

Jorgen shook his head. "It won't matter. If the taynix are really the secret to intergalactic travel, then we have to continue to experiment with them, no matter how dangerous they are. Though I may wear gloves next time. And a face mask."

"Maybe Cobb could find you some full-body armor."

"That might be nice."

"It's possible only the yellow ones are hyperdrives," I said. "The different colors might indicate different powers. Doomslug never exploded."

Jorgen nodded. "That's a plausible theory. We have enough of the yellow kind to work with those first. We can worry about the other kinds later." He

looked up at me, fixing his dark eyes on me like he saw right through me. “Why are you so worried about the taynix anyway?”

I shrugged. “I’m not.”

“You appointed yourself slug welfare specialist, but you’re going to tell me you don’t care?”

“*You* appointed me slug welfare specialist.”

“FM, I told you to keep them in a crate. That makes you a slug *location* specialist. You made up the welfare part all on your own.”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the door frame. “I just think we shouldn’t treat them like they’re machines. If they can get us off this planet before the Superiority succeeds in destroying us, we have to do everything in our power to make that happen. But they’re living creatures. We don’t have to be monsters while we do it, do we?”

“Of course we don’t.” Jorgen winced. “And if I’d listened to you, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten my face sliced up. Tell me the truth. How bad is it?”

“The medical people said you’d be fine.”

“Right, but I look ridiculous.”

He had little pieces of plastic tape holding his face together, so it was kind of true. “Hey, girls like scars, right?”

Jorgen closed his eyes.

Right. There was only one girl whose opinion he cared about, and she wasn’t here to appreciate them.

Though, now that I thought about it... “I mean, really, if there was ever a girl who was going to appreciate a scar, it’s Spensa, am I right?”

Jorgen gave me one satisfying look of shock and horror that I’d called him out before he recovered and turned the conversation back on me. “I think we were discussing your sudden obsession with animal rights.”

“I think we were discussing your face, but if you want to talk about animal rights—”

Jorgen’s eyes caught on something behind me, and I turned to find one of Cobb’s aides standing in the hallway. “Admiral Cobb needs you in the command center,” she said to Jorgen. “Should I tell him you’re indisposed?”

Jorgen groaned. “No, tell him I’m coming. He’s going to hear about this eventually.”

“What do you think it’s about?” I asked. “It’s too early for your report.”

“Come with me and find out,” Jorgen said. “You can help me explain what happened to my face. Since you’re the slug welfare specialist and all.”

I still needed to hunt down Gill plus any others that had liberated themselves in the meantime. But I wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to find out what Cobb’s plans were. I followed Jorgen down to Cobb’s command center, which was a large room with a wide table and a holoprojector at the front.

Cobb was seated at the table with two of his aides on either side of him. Across the table from him was a woman with dark skin and black hair that matched Jorgen’s, though she wore hers in twists along her scalp.

Jeshua Weight, Jorgen’s mother, was one of the most decorated pilots ever to retire from the DDF. Her political power had only increased when her husband joined the National Assembly. She had two other people with her—I guessed from their expensive clothing they were either minor politicians or other liaisons sent to speak on the National Assembly’s behalf.

Rig stood with one of the other engineers at the head of the table, fidgeting nervously. “We think we’re close to getting the planetary defense systems working,” Rig said. “The encryption is tough to crack, but we’ve broken some of the code, and we’re trying to make sense of what we’re looking at. It’s much more complicated than any of the programming we use in the caverns, and we’re not exactly sure what a lot of it does.”

Rig was apparently also capable of speaking in Cobb’s presence, though I could tell he was nervous. People tended to assume that anyone who passed the pilot’s test would be comfortable with public attention—or at least accustomed to it—but I didn’t think that was true in Rig’s case. At least he wasn’t trying to pretend *they* didn’t exist, even if he looked like he wished *he* didn’t.

“Presumably the code is what causes the gun platforms to shoot ships from the sky, yes?” Jeshua said in an even voice. “So if you can crack it, we

would be able to use those guns in our favor. It would help us a lot to be able to use those turrets the way we use the antiaircraft guns around Alta.”

“That’s the hope,” Rig said. “We’re also working on reviving an old shielding system that might help us to protect the planet from future attacks. A lot of it is still a mystery to us, so we can’t promise anything.”

Jeshua didn’t look pleased about that, though Rig and the other engineers were clearly doing all they could.

“Thank you for your report,” Cobb said. He looked over at Jorgen and me standing by the door. “Son, what in the North Star’s Light happened to you?”

Jorgen winced. “We had a little incident with one of the taynix. Apparently they need to be handled carefully.”

Jeshua looked alarmed. “You didn’t tell me these creatures were dangerous,” she said to Cobb.

“They’re hyperdrives,” Cobb said. “I’d imagine they’re very dangerous.”

This did not seem to make Jeshua feel any better. “Perhaps someone more *qualified* should be conducting these experiments.” She eyed Jorgen with a look of disapproval. Jorgen somehow managed to stand at attention and appear like he was shrinking into himself at the same time. Which made sense—his mother had basically announced that he wasn’t capable of doing his job.

It wasn’t exactly my place to speak in this meeting, but Jorgen had asked me to help explain. “The slug reacted poorly when Jorgen tried to communicate with it cytonically,” I said. “But we’re working on some theories to keep it from happening again.”

Jeshua narrowed her eyes at me. “Who are you?”

“She’s one of the pilots in Jorgen’s flight,” Cobb said. “She’s helping Jorgen and Rig with the slug experiments.”

“FM has some experience working with the taynix,” Jorgen said. “She’s helping us figure out how best to handle them.”

Jeshua looked over Jorgen’s patched-up face and made a tsking sound. “She’s obviously not doing a very good job.”

I bristled, but kept my mouth shut.

“It’s not her fault,” Rig cut in. “It’s the nature of the scientific process. We have to try things out, or we won’t get results.”

Huh. Apparently Rig didn’t hate me, if he was willing to defend me to the brass. He was clearly more comfortable talking about things he understood, and none of us understood the taynix and the hyperdrives very well. Maybe if I found a minute to ask him about his other work, he’d stop treating me like a pariah.

“We don’t have a report for you yet,” Jorgen added. “We’re still working on it.”

“That’s fine,” Cobb said. “That isn’t why I called for you. There’s something I need you to hear.”

Cobb nodded to one of his aides, who pushed some buttons on the holographic projector. Instead of a hologram though, an audio recording began.

“Admiral Cobb,” a voice said. It was strangely accented and oddly even, like it might not be entirely real. “This is Minister Cuna. I’m sorry our earlier communication was interrupted. I was betrayed by the same people who sent the delver to your planet and am no longer able to hyperjump. I have information from your agent, Spensa. She asked me to come to your planet to offer aid, but I have been attacked by our mutual enemies and am unable to reach you as planned. Instead, I must ask for your help. My people and I are marooned on the abandoned outpost at Sunreach, and the radicals in control of the Superiority government are hunting for me. I fear we have very little time. If you can reach us, I offer you all the help I can give in return. We are located at—”

The voice read a few coordinates, but then the recording cut off.

“Is that it?” Jorgen asked.

Cobb nodded. “Even if we had the full location, I don’t know how to reach them without a functional hyperdrive. We were wondering if you felt anything from it. Any of those vibrations you keep talking about?”

Jeshua’s face darkened when Cobb asked Jorgen about his cytonic abilities, but she didn’t interrupt him.

“No,” Jorgen said. “Should I?”

“My previous communications from Minister Cuna came via radio,” Cobb said, “but this one came through the platform’s old communications systems. They’re probably using some kind of faster-than-light communication device. If it uses cytonic technology, we thought there might be some component only a cytonic could hear.”

Jorgen shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t feel anything.”

“How did we receive it?” I asked. “Do *we* have an FTL communicator?”

I probably didn’t have the authority to ask that question, but Rig answered it anyway. “Not that we know of,” Rig said. “But there are a lot of things the platform systems are capable of that we haven’t been able to figure out yet. The message was routed through one of the receptors in the communications system.”

“So we received it,” Cobb said, “but we don’t exactly know how. Engineering is trying to figure out if we have the ability to respond.”

Interesting. If we’d been able to get up here and investigate the platforms surrounding the planet years ago, we might have been better able to figure out how to defend ourselves.

Which was probably one of the reasons the Superiority had been so intent on keeping us in the caverns below the planet’s surface.

“What are we going to do if we can answer?” Jorgen asked.

“We don’t know for certain what this person’s intentions are,” Cobb said. “It might be a trap. Alternatively, it might be our only lead on an ally, and stars know we could use a few of those right now.”

“If this person is indeed a minister,” Jeshua said, “perhaps we could use their connections to reach people higher up in the Superiority government, to find a way to reach an agreement.”

*An agreement?*

Jorgen’s shock echoed my own. “You’re going to try to *talk* to the Superiority?”

Jeshua nodded. “We’ve been fighting this war for too long. Continuing the way we are will only result in our extinction. Now that we know more about the forces we’re facing, the National Assembly believes we should



start considering the political implications of the situation, along with the military ones.”

In principle I agreed, but I hadn’t seen any evidence that the Superiority wanted to negotiate with us. Especially if they’d been the reason for the delver’s appearance.

Cobb cleared his throat. He had to hate this, but he was too good at his job to betray that on his face. “We’ll try to respond, but getting those coordinates does us no good if we can’t *get* there, and we can’t do that without a hyperdrive.” Cobb focused on Jorgen. “Spensa felt coordinates in her mind, and then she was able to travel to them. I was hoping that recording might do something similar for you, but if not, we’re going to have to go through with our other plan.”

“Other plan, sir?” Jorgen said.

Jeshua nodded. They’d obviously already discussed this. “Yes,” she said. “The alien who crashed here is the only one among us who might be able to produce coordinates that would allow us to reach this person. We’re going to need to wake her up.”

## Six

The next morning, I was paged to the medical bay almost immediately upon waking. I found Jorgen standing outside, looking into Alanik's room through the glass. The bandages on his face were new and clean, but still numerous. "They say her wounds have mostly healed," he said. "They've been keeping her sedated, but now they're bringing her around. Cobb suggested that I talk to her since we're both cytonics. I could use your help. You're...better with people than I am."

"Of course," I said. That was quite the admission for Jorgen, who never liked to appear less than perfect. But this was a delicate situation—Alanik had been unconscious for weeks now, and we didn't know much about her. "Will we be able to speak to her?"

Jorgen held up a pin. "Rig says this is a translator. Spensa took the one Alanik was wearing when she crashed, but the engineers found more in her ship. It should make it so we can understand each other."

That would make things a lot easier. "Any particular tactic you think we should use to talk to her?"

"No idea. Do you have a suggestion?"

"I think maybe we should try to convey that we're friends first. Help her feel like we're all on the same side." I didn't know much about what had gone on between Alanik and Spensa. "We are, right?"

"I hope so," Jorgen said. "That sounds like a good tactic. Thanks."

One of the doctors stepped out of the medical bay and nodded to Jorgen. "She's waking. She may be disoriented at first, so don't be surprised if she has a hard time talking."

Jorgen gave the doctor a crisp nod and then we walked into Alanik's room, stopping at her bedside.

The yellow overhead lights cast eerie shadows over Alanik's strange features. With her cheeks oddly pronounced, her skin that strange shade of

violet with white growths protruding from her skin like crystals, she was beautiful in an unnerving sort of way. She stirred, murmuring something softly, and then opened her eyes.

They looked human, except for their violet color. I'd never seen a human with eyes quite that pale and arresting. She looked up at us in confusion.

Jorgen glanced at me. He wanted me to take point on this.

"Alanik," I said. "My name is FM. I'm glad you're awake."

Jorgen held the pin awkwardly between us, and it translated the words into a lilting language I'd never heard. Maybe I should have used my real name, but I had become accustomed to everyone using my callsign. Besides, to an alien, "FM" probably wouldn't seem any more strange than "Freyja."

Alanik squinted at me, still confused. If she was alarmed by the many bandages on Jorgen's face, she didn't show it. Probably a lot of things here looked strange to her, so what was one more? "Human," she said. "Where is...the other one?"

"Spensa," I said. "She left. You gave her coordinates, and she went to take your place."

Alanik closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she looked more focused. More alert. "Where am I?"

"In a medical facility," I told her. "On a platform above a planet called Detritus. You were shot down by autonomous platforms. That wasn't my people. We can't control them. The guns shoot at us too."

Alanik nodded. "Humans," she said again. "How have you survived?"

"With difficulty," I said. "We've been defending this planet against the Superiority for years."

"We were allies once," Alanik said. "My people were punished for working with you. The Superiority...they say they want peace, but in truth they oppress us. Their peace is only control."

"Yes," I said. "And they want my people dead. We need your help."

Alanik's eyes narrowed slightly. "I need to contact my people," she said. "The other one...Spensa...may have already arrived at Starsight. They are expecting me to check in, and I will need to tell them what's happened."

Jorgen and I exchanged a glance. Alanik thought it was still the same day as she'd arrived. "About that," I said. "You were injured in the crash, and our doctors have been trying to help you, but they didn't know much about your physiology. They've been keeping you in a coma, giving you a chance to heal."

Alanik looked at me in horror. "How long?"

How long? I looked to Jorgen. "About nineteen days," he said.

"That long?" Alanik struggled to sit, though the tubes and wires attaching her to the medical monitor got in her way. She grabbed at them with her slender hands, and I noticed her nails were made of the same white substance that protruded from her cheeks. They were sharp and pointed, almost like talons.

"We need your help," Jorgen said again. "We're all trapped here."

Alanik stared at him. "You aren't trapped," she said. "You are cytonic, same as Spensa. Can you—"

Jorgen shook his head. "I can't do anything," he said. "I've only just learned about my powers, and I don't know how to use them. I need you to teach me, so we can get my people off this planet. I need your help."

He looked at me, but I didn't know what to say beyond that. He'd made a pretty good case. "Please," I added. "You said we were allies, right? Well, we need allies now, and it sounds like your people do too. We have a message from someone in the Superiority, a faction that wants to help us. But we don't know how to reach them—"

"Don't trust them!" Alanik said. She pulled at the tubes on her chest, tugging them free. Thankfully they seemed to only be sensors, though she had a needle in her arm hooked up to an IV. As she shifted it, a spot of dark blood formed on the bandage that held it in place. "You can't trust them. They say they want to help, but they don't. They only want control. You can't—"

She broke off as a shadow darkened the window to the hallway. I turned and saw Cobb standing there with Jorgen's mother. They were speaking quietly enough that we couldn't hear them through the glass, but Jeshua Weight did not look happy.

“Okay,” I said, trying to hold Alanik’s attention. I reached down and took her hand, hoping this wasn’t some sort of cultural taboo to her people, but she didn’t pull away. “We can’t trust them. This is why we need your help. You know more than we do, so we need you to guide us. We don’t know how to use the powers, but we do have ships, and resources. We can help you in return.”

“FM,” Jorgen said. He gave me a warning look, and I knew I’d gone too far. We couldn’t promise her resources. That would be up to Command and the National Assembly. I might have just lied to her. It could be a tactically sound decision to make promises to Alanik’s people, but I didn’t have the authority to do that.

Jeshua knocked on the glass and gestured to the door, which I’d closed behind me. Jorgen sighed, set the pin down on the edge of Alanik’s bed sheet, and walked to the door, stepping out into the hall to talk to his mother.

Alanik was still holding my hand. Her lavender skin looked so strange against mine, but the anatomy of her hand was human. She was a person, same as me. Alien, but familiar. She was far from home, alone and frightened. I could imagine what that would feel like.

“What were you going to do when you reached Starsight?” I asked her.

Alanik hesitated. “I am a spy for my people,” she said. “We need their hyperdrive technology. Without it, they isolate us on our planet. They deny us passage on their ships. They control our imports, our economy, our ability to progress. We need to know their secrets.”

“So the hyperdrives,” I said. “You don’t know how they work.”

“No,” Alanik said. “That was what I was going to learn. But if it has been weeks, the opportunity may have passed.”

It had—Spensa had taken her place, pretended to be Alanik. Sharing the information Spensa had discovered—the very secrets Alanik had intended to steal—might go a long way toward building goodwill between us.

But I definitely didn’t have clearance to do that. I glanced out the window and found Jorgen talking to Cobb and his mother. From the look of it, Jeshua was doing most of the talking.

“Are you also a prisoner here?” Alanik asked.

I looked down at her. “You’re not a prisoner,” I said. “We were trying to help you.”

Alanik shook her head. “All of you. You are prisoners on this planet, dependent on the Superiority.”

Oh, that. “More than your people, I think,” I said. “They don’t trade with us. They’ve attacked us for years, making us fight them to survive. We live underground, using only the resources of this planet and the means we had with us when our ships crashed here—that was generations ago.”

“So you are desperate,” Alanik said. “You will do anything to escape.”

It was true, but I didn’t like the way she said it. “We want to work together,” I said.

“You want to speak with the Superiority,” she said. “To respond to their message.”

“We have a message from someone,” I said. “If you would listen to it, maybe you could help us figure out if that person is—”

“You will make a deal with them,” Alanik said. “You will do it because their false peace is better than your war.”

That was startlingly similar to what Jeshua Weight had said the National Assembly wanted to do.

“Have other planets tried that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Alanik said. “My people were punished because we fought alongside yours. Some on my planet think it is better to go along with the Superiority. To accept their peace. But their peace is a tool to maintain their power.”

“We don’t want that kind of peace,” I said. The decision wasn’t up to me, so I was surprised by the strength of my response. “They’ve murdered my friends, our people. They tried to wipe out our entire planet, and I’m still not sure why we survived. I don’t want to work with them, Alanik, and I don’t think others will either. We aren’t a peaceful people. We will fight.”

That should have been the opposite of what I wanted. It was the opposite of what my Disputer friends stood for.

Maybe my time in the DDF had changed me the way they all said it would. Several of them had tried to talk me out of taking the pilot's test. They said the DDF would make me see things their way, compromise my ideals. I thought becoming a pilot would give me more authority to speak up for those ideals, so I did it anyway.

And here I was, arguing for war instead of peace.

Alanik had it right though. Not all peace was of equal value. I wasn't going to trade one cage for another. I hoped that in the end, the warlike nature of the Defiant League would protect us from that kind of prison, even if it certainly also had its downsides.

Alanik's eyes met mine, staring at me intently. And I thought for a moment that she believed me.

The door opened, and Jorgen motioned to me. "FM," he said, "Command wants to talk to her."

Alanik looked at me, as if gauging my reaction, so I tried not to look alarmed. I squeezed her hand and then stepped away, but I didn't leave the room. I wasn't going to leave unless Cobb ordered me to.

He and Jeshua strode into the room, and Jeshua stared at Alanik with obvious disdain. I glanced at Jorgen, who hovered by the door, and he shrugged. He couldn't do anything about this, and neither could I.

"It's Alanik, is that right?" Cobb asked.

Alanik narrowed her eyes at him. "Who are you, and why have you kept me here?"

"We were trying to help you, Alanik," I said. "We were just—"

"We need to know who you are," Jeshua said. "And where you come from."

Alanik sat up straighter. She'd removed all the sensors except the needle in her arm, but she appeared to be growing stronger and more alert the longer she was awake. Hopefully she'd healed enough that we weren't putting her in danger by overtaxing her. "I am Alanik of the UrDail," she said. "And you are?"

"I am Admiral Cobb," Cobb said. "And this is—"

“It does not matter who we are,” Jeshua said. “We need you to tell us what you know about hyperdrives and the Superiority’s faster-than-light communication.”

I closed my eyes. I was pretty sure from my conversation with Alanik that we knew more about hyperdrives than she did. I looked over at Jorgen. We should have coordinated before this conversation, made a plan.

He shook his head. We couldn’t stop this from happening.

“I am your prisoner, then,” Alanik said. “You intend to use me.”

“We only want to exchange information,” Cobb said. “We have a mutual enemy.”

“This isn’t an exchange,” Jeshua said, cutting him off. “Tell us what you know, and we’ll let you go.”

Alanik straightened up further. “You’ll let me go,” she repeated. “You think you can hold me here?”

“We have your ship,” she said. “We will negotiate for your release if you will cooperate with us.”

Did Alanik need her ship to transport herself to her planet? The slugs clearly didn’t need ships to hyperjump.

“Mom,” Jorgen said. “I think—”

“You know nothing,” Alanik said.

Jeshua straightened to her full height—which wasn’t especially tall—and looked down her nose at Alanik. “You’re not doing yourself any favors here.”

“Mom—” Jorgen said. Alanik looked over at him and Jorgen cried out, squeezing his eyes shut and putting a hand to his forehead between the bandages. I took a step toward her—I didn’t know what she was doing to him, but she was obviously an accomplished cytonic. We barely knew what they were capable of.

“What are you doing to my son?” Jeshua said, grabbing Jorgen by the arm.

Jorgen collided with the doorframe, opening his eyes wide.

And then Alanik disappeared. One moment she was there and the next she was gone, leaving the bandage and the IV needle to fall against the



sheets, the dark stain of her blood spreading onto the white fabric.

“Seriously?” I said. “Why did you do that?”

“FM,” Cobb said. His tone held a warning—I obviously wasn’t supposed to speak to Jeshua Weight that way—but at the moment I didn’t care.

“I was making progress with her,” I said. “She might have helped us.”

Jeshua was still focused on Jorgen. “What did she do to you?”

“She was talking to me, that’s all,” Jorgen said. “Speaking in my mind.”

“What did she say?”

We all stared at him, and Jorgen hesitated. “Not much,” he said. “Just that she didn’t trust us.”

Cobb raised an eyebrow at him. Jorgen wasn’t a particularly good liar, but if he decided to withhold information from his superiors, he must have a scudding good reason for it.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked Cobb. “She was our only chance at communicating with Cuna, wasn’t she?”

“What did she say when you were talking to her?” Cobb asked me.

“She said we shouldn’t trust anyone from the Superiority. She said they would lie to us, that we would trade away our freedom to them if we tried to make peace with them.”

“We need a full report of everything she said to you,” Jeshua said. “We’ll send it down to the National Assembly, so they can decide what we should do.”

“We’ll make that report,” Cobb said. “And then I will decide what to share with the National Assembly.” Jeshua scowled at Cobb, but he kept talking. “FM, Jorgen, let’s head up to the command center for debriefing.”

He stalked out of the room and Jorgen and I trailed after him, leaving Jeshua behind.

## Seven

When I left the command center, I headed toward the engineering bay to check on the taynix. I'd told Cobb everything I remembered from my conversation with Alanik, but Cobb had interviewed Jorgen separately, so I still didn't know what Alanik had said in his head. Jeshua hadn't been in on either of the meetings, which I was sure had angered her.

I didn't have a lot of sympathy for her. I was furious that Alanik was gone—and with her our only chance to communicate with Cuna and to train Jorgen in more advanced cytonics. Spensa's grandmother had helped some, but her knowledge was limited.

The National Assembly was so used to ordering people around and having everyone do what they said. I was glad Jorgen had taken me to talk to Alanik—but it highlighted a huge weakness in our government. We didn't have diplomats. We weren't used to cooperation. The Assembly wanted to treat this as a political situation, but they were scudding *bad* at it. We were supposed to be Defiant, but what good did that do us if all we did was defy other people to our own detriment?

I had no way to know what Alanik was going to tell her people—our former allies—about the humans of Detritus, but I guessed it wouldn't be good.

I stopped short at the end of the corridor that led to the engineering bay. Rig's metal slug box, based off M-Bot's supposed hyperdrive, was resting in the middle of the floor.

No one else was in sight, and I guessed that Rig hadn't left it there. I knelt down and opened it, and found the two yellow taynix inside, snuffling around like they were hungry.

If one of them had hyperjumped, it had brought the box and the other slug along with it. Rig must have missed its disappearance, or he would

have gone looking for the box and found it as soon as he opened the door to Engineering.

I didn't know how much it would help, but at this point any news felt like good news. I dropped one of Rig's location trackers on the floor, picked up the box of slugs, tucked it under my arm, and opened the doors to the engineering bay.

A couple of people from Rig's team were working on a hunk of metal and wires that looked like it might have come from one of the platforms. Rig was nowhere in sight.

"Have you seen Rodge?" I asked them.

One of them waved a hand at me. "He's at the platform controls in Charlie Sector."

My instinct was to feed the taynix in the box first. But if their hunger made them teleport more, I'd wait a little longer and see if we could catch them in the act.

I carried the box with me to Charlie Sector to find Rig. As I passed a series of exterior windows, I looked up at the platforms above ours. I wasn't exactly sure how they'd been built originally, but the technology of the people who lived here before us was far more advanced than ours.

Until they'd been destroyed by the delver, each and every one of them wiped out, leaving the planet barren and alone.

I didn't really understand why humans had chosen to live on Detritus to begin with. I'd been born in the caverns, but the stories we told of other planets spoke of green trees and vast oceans, fertile land to grow food instead of vats hidden away in caverns. The surface of Detritus was a craggy wasteland of debris both natural and mechanical. We'd managed to scrape together enough fertile soil to grow orchards near Alta Base, but I didn't imagine Detritus had ever been a paradise to live on. It seemed strange to me that people with such superior technology chose this place to call home.

If we did manage to use the taynix to escape Detritus, I wondered where we would go. How would we find a place to go, and if we did, how would we know if we'd be safe? Detritus was inhospitable, but it was also familiar.

The idea of living somewhere with an ocean like Old Earth seemed mildly terrifying. How did all that water not consume the land around it?

I looked up at the platforms above, imagining the stars beyond—white lights burning brightly against the black. Some of those would have planets around them, planets we could visit in the blink of an eye with FTL travel. But if the Superiority controlled all of them, would we really be able to escape? Would we be able to run far enough, or would we merely be looking for a better battle position?

Alanik seemed to agree with the basic philosophies of the DDF. She didn't trust peace, and was afraid that we would accept another set of chains for a false promise of safety, and the National Assembly seemed to be leaning in that direction.

I stood by what I said though. I knew my people. We didn't trust peace any more than Alanik did. In fact, I was afraid we'd never be willing to set down our weapons. A wasteland could feel more comfortable than a paradise, if that was what you were used to. Though I agreed with the Disputers who yearned for peace, I didn't know that I would be able to trust it.

I reached Charlie Sector and wove between the long rectangular blocks that held a lot of the machinery keeping the platform running. Power matrixes hummed with life, and a water pump churned, supplying our indoor plumbing. Most of the rest of the devices I couldn't identify. I found Rig standing at the side of one such block. He'd pulled the paneling off the side, revealing a set of wires and circuit boards beneath. The ground around him was littered with pieces of machinery.

Rig's boss in the Engineering Corps, a woman with long pale hair—whose name I thought was Ziming—stood to the side, looking over the rubble.

"I've got Thadwick picking up your work on the platforms," she said. "We're close to getting those gun emplacements working. Do you have anything more on the encryption?"

Rig shook his head. "I'm sorry. I've been working on the hyperdrives, so I haven't had time."

“We’ll keep at it,” Ziming said. “At least we’re into the shield system now. There are still too many questions to run a test yet, but we’re getting closer. Keep up the good work.”

Ziming strode past me, and I nodded to her. Rig was still looking into the tech behind the panel like it was a difficult problem.

“Rig?” I said.

Rig jumped, and then stared at me wide-eyed. “Hey,” he said. “Hey.”

That was not only a one-word utterance, but the same word twice. Not an auspicious beginning. “I found this in the hall.” I lifted the box for him to see. “So unless you left it there, I’m thinking the slugs teleported it.”

“Oh!” Rig said. “Oh, that’s good. Are they still in there?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s been most of a day since they’ve eaten, so they’re probably hungry, but I thought I’d leave them that way for a bit so we could see if they’d do it again.”

“That’s great!” Rig said. He rubbed his palms on the pants of his jumpsuit. “Thanks.”

He blinked at me like he wasn’t sure what I was still doing there, and I sighed. I hadn’t trekked all the way out here just to turn around and go back. “Did you hear about what happened with Alanik?”

“I heard she disappeared,” Rig said. He winced. “I guess maybe we should have been more delicate about interrogating a cytonic.”

“I tried to be delicate,” I said. “But I didn’t have the rank to insist others do the same. I got to talk to her a little bit, and I think her people are also being oppressed by the Superiority.” Though evidently the Superiority wasn’t shooting at them. That must be nice.

Rig looked away from me back to the wall he’d been tinkering with. There were a *lot* of wires in there, and several blocky widgets similar to the ones he’d already removed. Layers and layers of circuits and machinery, extending deep into the unit. I wondered if there was any way to get inside this one, or if it was just a massive block of technology.

I’d meant to catch him at a moment when I could ask him about his work, and this seemed like a good time.

“What was your boss saying?” I asked. “You guys are close to getting the gun platforms working?”

“Not close enough,” Rig said. “The encryption on the gun platforms is a lot heavier than on most of the other platform systems. Which makes sense. If someone is going to hijack your water system, that’s bad. If they hijack your gun emplacements, that can be much worse.”

“I guess so,” I said. “Though I’d rather have working water than working guns.”

“Depends on whether there’s something you need to shoot at in a hurry,” Rig said. “The water will keep you alive in the long term, but it won’t matter if you don’t live through the moment.”

“What did she mean about the shields?” I asked. “It’s something experimental?”

Rig sighed. “Experimental would suggest that we’ve experimented with it. Some of my colleagues managed to hack into the planetary shield system. We’re not entirely sure what a lot of it does, but some of it was clearly intended to turn parts of the debris field into a shield against orbital attacks. But we don’t have a projection of what the shield is supposed to do, let alone confirmation that it would work.”

I smiled. That was a lot of words all in a row. Coherent words, even. This was definitely progress. Maybe he’d never had an issue with me at all. Maybe he was just *that* socially awkward.

“What are you doing now?” I asked.

“Trying to find the communicator,” Rig said. “We received that communication, which means we must have some kind of hypercomm. If it can receive, it was probably once designed to send as well—so if we can find and examine it, we might be able to make it work.”

“Did you find it?” I asked. “How did you know where to look?”

“I followed the path of the alerts we received in the main system,” he said. He glanced at me self-consciously. “How is probably boring, but the trail led me here. I think the communicator is somewhere in this block, but I don’t know what a lot of this is.” He glanced at the mess around him. “I don’t want to break the thing in case Cuna sends us another transmission,

but if we could get it working, we could respond. And that might be the only way for us to get in touch, now that...”

“Now that Alanik was scared away,” I said. “It really wasn’t my fault.”

Rig looked horrified. “I didn’t say that it was! I mean, I didn’t think it. I mean, I’m sure—” He blushed. “I’m sure you did a great job talking to her. Look, I’ll probably be working on this for a while, so you can take the box back to the lab. Or leave it here and I’ll watch it! Either way is fine.”

He turned back to the machinery, unplugging some wires and then pulling out another block and setting it to the side, inspecting what was beneath it.

I set down the box with the slugs in it. I’d thought we were making progress, but now I was being dismissed. “Is there something I can do to help?”

“No!” Rig said. “I mean, you’re supposed to be watching the slugs, right? I wouldn’t want to keep you.”

Yeah, definitely trying to get rid of me. I was getting really sick of wondering what was going on with him. “What’s your problem with me?” I asked.

Rig looked at me, wide-eyed. “I don’t have a problem with you.”

“Really? Because you obviously don’t want me to be here. You barely talk to me, even when we’re supposed to be working together. You seem to like Jorgen just fine, but you won’t even speak to me. What did I do to make you dislike me so much?”

Rig pushed a hand through his hair, closing his eyes. “I don’t dislike you, FM.”

“Then what?” I demanded. I probably should have been more reasonable, but the *last* person I’d tried to be reasonable with had disappeared into thin air, probably fleeing across the universe to get away. And while I knew she wasn’t fleeing from me personally, it still didn’t feel good.

At least Rig couldn’t hyperjump away.

“No,” Rig said quietly. “I...scud, Spensa didn’t tell you?” He looked at me plaintively, like he was begging me to have any idea what he was

talking about. I was starting to have the creeping sensation that I was missing something enormous.

Rig sighed. “I guess she didn’t. I didn’t mean for you to think that I didn’t like you, when the truth is I—”

Oh scud.

Oh SCUD.

I *was* missing something, something so obvious I clearly should have seen it.

Rig wasn’t afraid of me. He—

“—kind of, um, like you,” he mumbled.

“That— *Oh*.” My face went hot. I was being as bad as Nedd right now. I did not see this coming. I’d known Nedd was interested in me, of course, and about Jorgen and Spensa, but none of them had acted like *this*. I normally thought I was pretty good at reading people, but—

“Why would Spensa have told me that?” I asked.

“I asked Spensa to ask you if you were interested,” Rig mumbled. “I thought probably she did, and you weren’t, and neither of you ever wanted to tell me, which was probably for the best. But I guess she never mentioned it at all? She must have been distracted by saving the world and everything. I get it.”

He didn’t sound like he got it. He sounded hurt. “No,” I said. “She never said anything. I had no idea. But...aren’t you interested in Spensa?”

Rig choked. “*Spensa*? Do I seem like I want to torture myself?”

I would have laughed if I weren’t in a state of shock. Rig and I stared at each other, the longest he’d ever made eye contact with me at one time.

Rig grimaced. “I’m sorry I made you feel like I disliked you. I was embarrassed, that’s all. We don’t ever have to talk about this again, and I’ll try to act less like I hate you and not die of embarrassment, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. My face was still flaming, and Rig was bright red, and I probably should have done us both the favor of preserving what was left of our dignity by walking away. I felt like a complete idiot for confronting him when he’d obviously been trying so hard to avoid it. Nedd had done the



same thing to me, and that had become all kinds of awkward the minute it was out in the open.

Except I didn't want to go. I'd *wanted* to get to know Rig, and I still did, even if it was awkward. Rig was worth wading through the awkwardness for. "Are you sure I can't stay and help?" I asked again.

Rig looked at me like I had lost my mind, and maybe I had. "You really want to help?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, I want to help you figure out how to answer that message."

"Of course." Rig somehow managed to look even more dejected. Obviously that wasn't the answer he wanted. I wasn't even sure it was the answer I'd meant to give him.

Between this and my experience with Alanik, I was clearly much worse at dealing with people than I thought I was. "And I'd like to talk to you some more," I said quickly. "Do you think we can manage to act like human beings while we do that?"

Rig looked a little horrified, but then he smiled tentatively. "Maybe? I mean, if this conversation is any indication, I'd say it's unlikely."

I laughed. "Yeah, okay. Do you think we could act like freaks, but not freaks who hate each other?"

"That sounds a little more achievable." He squinted at the next panel. "If the schematic I looked at is correct—not that I completely understood it, mind you—I think the hypercomm should be somewhere in this block. Want to help me lift this off?"

"Sure," I said. I stepped around some of the mechanical bits he'd already removed. "I have no idea what any of this is."

"And I have only vague ideas," Rig said. "To be honest, it will probably take a lifetime to sort through all the things that make this platform run. Don't get me wrong—it's fascinating work. I just wish we were doing it under better circumstances."

"Don't we all," I said. Rig unplugged a couple of cables, and then he lifted half of the panel and I hoisted the other half. Together we lowered it to the ground.

Rig brushed some grease off his hands onto his jumpsuit. “That was really unmanly of me, wasn’t it? Asking you to help me lift that thing. Nedd would have done it one-handed just to show off.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not interested in Nedd,” I said.

Rig looked at me, and there was something so sweet and vulnerable about him that it made me want to reach out and touch him.

I stood frozen to the spot. I’d tried not to think about guys since I’d joined the DDF. Something about all the fighting and dying made dating seem ridiculous, like it had about as much place in flight school as the fancy dresses people wore to parties back home.

But I was thinking about one now, and I didn’t really want to stop.

“Is there someone you *are* interested in?” Rig asked quietly.

He looked like he was bracing for bad news. I wanted to say yes, but I didn’t want to give him false hope. I liked him, yeah. But could it really go anywhere? What future did any of us have with things the way they were?

Not one we could bank on, that was for certain. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Yeah, okay,” Rig said. “No problem.”

He’d taken that as a rejection, but I wasn’t sure it was.

Rig cleared his throat and turned to look at the machinery behind the panel we’d just removed.

“Oh,” Rig said.

There, amid the wires and circuits and foreign devices, was a box identical to the one Rig had built based on M-Bot’s design.

“That’s how they did it,” Rig said, and I nodded.

We had an FTL communicator.

But it required a taynix to make it work.

## Eight

“So you’re sure,” Jorgen said. “The FTL communicator is designed to house one of these slugs?” He was sitting on one of the metal chairs in the engineering bay with Fine, the purple taynix, stretched across his lap. Jorgen had fewer bandages on his face now, the remaining little white pieces of medical tape standing out in stark contrast to his dark skin.

Jorgen ran his fingers absently through Fine’s orange spines, and it shimmied slightly, like it was happy about it.

“Pretty sure,” Rig said. “FM discovered that the slugs do bring the box with them when they hyperjump. If the box in M-Bot’s ship was built to house a slug, the box in the FTL communicator probably has the same purpose.”

“But you wouldn’t want the slug jumping away with the communicator,” Jorgen pointed out.

“Our theory,” I said, “is that the different kinds of slugs have different cytonic abilities. The purple slugs and the red slugs don’t escape the way the yellow ones do, so the yellow slugs are the teleporters.”

“Right,” Rig said. “And the red one did that...exploding thing. It’s possible that the purple ones have a third power.”

“A communication power,” Jorgen said. “Like the way Spensa communicated with Gran-Gran from light-years away.”

Rig smiled. “Exactly.” He turned and looked at me—which he seemed able to do a lot more after our conversation. This time I had to resist looking away. I wasn’t entirely comfortable with the way I felt when he paid attention to me—like my heart was skipping beats. It made me nervous and worry about hurting him, which was stupid, because I already had, hadn’t I? He seemed to think I’d let him down easy, and maybe I had. Now I just needed to leave well enough alone.

But I still felt unsettled, and more than a little disappointed.

“But why would you build the same box in the ship and the communicator?” Jorgen asked. “If you’re not going to teleport the communicator around, and the purple slugs can’t escape, you don’t need the same sort of device in the communicator as you do in the ship. Not if the purpose of the box is to make sure the ship hyperjumps with the slug.”

“That’s true,” Rig said, “if the only purpose of the box is to send the ship with the slug.” He pointed to a piece he’d pulled out of the device before we found the box. “But I think the inside of the box might have a second function. This is a holographic projector. It’s not as advanced as the one on M-Bot, but it’s *more* advanced than the ones we use. I think it might have been used to project an image on the inside of the box.”

“Shouldn’t M-Bot’s box have one of those too, then?” Jorgen asked.

“M-Bot’s technology allows him to project holograms on almost any surface,” Rig said. “So he would have been able to project onto the inside of the box without a dedicated holoprojector.”

“And the purpose of the projector is to tell the slugs what to do,” I said.

Rig smiled at me. His cheeks dimpled, and my heart did that skippy thing again. I definitely needed to figure out how to get that under control. “That’s the idea,” he said.

Jorgen nodded. “And if we have the slugs, the box, and the projector—”

“Then we should be able to do the same thing.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “That’s good work. I don’t suppose getting the communicator to work is as easy as putting a purple slug in it?”

“I tried that,” Rig said. “The slug sits there, and maybe if we waited long enough it might send a communication somewhere...”

“But we need to be able to direct what it says,” Jorgen said. “How do we do that? Do we even know where to send the message?”

“I think so,” Rig said. “There’s some metadata that came with the communication from Minister Cuna. I think we might be able to use it to respond. The communicator has some hardware similar to Alanik’s translation pin, and I think that might send a specific message through the taynix even if the taynix doesn’t actually *understand* the message. What I

haven't figured out is how to get the slug to participate in the communication."

"It probably has something to do with cytonics," Jorgen said. "Boomslug exploded while I was trying to talk to it with my mind. So maybe I have to"—he gave me a side-eye—"ask it to send the message?"

"Or induce it to somehow?" Rig asked.

"What were you thinking about when Boomslug exploded?" I asked. "You said you were trying to talk to it. What were you saying?"

Jorgen rubbed the back of his neck. "Nothing much. You said I should befriend it, so I was trying to...empathize with it, I guess."

"Empathize with it," Rig said.

Jorgen groaned. "Yes, okay? FM said I should bond with it—"

"And you told me that was stupid—"

"Because I *thought* it was stupid. But nothing else was working, so I thought it would be worth a try. I told it I was sorry that I ripped it out of its home and was now invading its mind and talking to it through that creepy place with all the eyes. Okay?"

"Wait," I said. "The eyes?"

"Yeah..." He trailed off, and looked at the slug.

"The eyes," Rig said. "You said they're creepy, right? And you're afraid of them?"

"I'm not afraid of them," Jorgen said. "But yeah, the times I've seen them, they're...unnerving. It's uncomfortable, all of them staring at me. It makes me self-conscious."

"Self-conscious," I said. "Otherworldly, all-powerful beings that could snuff your life out in an instant—along with the rest of the lives on our planet—stare at you, and that makes you *self-conscious*."

"Yes, okay?" Jorgen said. "It's not like I *choose* how I feel about them. It's hard to explain if you've never experienced it."

"But the slugs have," Rig said. "And when you thought about those things, Boomslug was frightened."

"Maybe," Jorgen said. "So when I thought of the eyes, the slug used its cytonic abilities. I suppose we could try again, to confirm..." He felt at the

bandages on his face. “Maybe we should try one of the other varieties, like the teleporting ones. Perhaps I could...*scare* the slug into hyperjumping.”

“It seems like a good thing to try,” Rig said.

They both looked at me, like they wanted my opinion.

“Um,” I said. “I don’t love the idea of terrifying the slugs, but since it’s the only lead we have, it seems worth trying.”

“Right,” Jorgen said. He gingerly lifted Fine off his lap and put him in the crate. “Maybe we could use one of the slugs in the metal box. You said they already moved it once, right?”

“Right,” I said. I turned around to grab the box from where we’d left it next to the slug crate.

The box was gone.

“Well, we’ve proven they hyperjump with the box then, right?” Jorgen asked.

“Yes,” I said. “*Where* they took the box is another question.” I glanced out in the hall, but the thing wasn’t there.

“We can use a different slug,” Rig said, “and find the box later.”

I retrieved Gill from the crate.

Jorgen took Gill in his hands and looked him in the face. “Do you think I should try to...bond with it first?”

“I’m not sure how that will help you scare it,” Rig said. He looked at me like he expected me to argue.

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t think bonding it is necessary here.” I didn’t *want* the slugs to be miserable, but befriending them might actively make them more comfortable and less likely to move.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “I’m not going to hum this time.”

“That seems like it would be to everyone’s benefit,” Rig said.

“I don’t know,” I added. “If our goal is to terrify the slug, your humming might help.”

More dimples.

Scud, I was in so much trouble.

“Here goes,” Jorgen said. He closed his eyes, and nothing happened.

Rig and I looked at each other. The trouble with experimenting with cytonics was that the majority of the time we had no idea what was happening.

Then, without warning, Gill disappeared.

“Oh!” Jorgen said. “Hey! It worked.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Um...where did Gill go?”

We all looked around, but he wasn’t in the immediate vicinity.

“It’s occurring to me now,” I said, “that if you’re successful at this, you create more work for me.”

“Hey,” Jorgen said. “You volunteered for this job.”

I did. I headed out into the hall, searching the surrounding rooms for Gill. I found the box with the other two yellow taynix in it in an adjoining room, and brought it back and set it inside the door. There was no sign of Gill in the surrounding halls though, or the corridors beyond that.

I was about to give up when one of the aides from Command came up the hallway holding a canvas bag that emitted a fluting sound. “Admiral Cobb sent this for you,” he said. “Apparently it materialized in the middle of his holoprojection.”

“Thanks,” I said, lifting Gill out of the bag. “You can keep the bag in case you see any more of them.”

“Okay,” the aide said, looking at the taynix warily.

Gill shuddered a little, trembling under my touch, and I reached into my pocket, pulling out a little tin of caviar and offering a bite to Gill. Even my parents would have to approve of this if they knew the slugs were the secret to saving the lives of everyone on Detritus.

“Okay,” Rig said when I returned. “We have an idea for another experiment. Is Gill ready?”

“Hasn’t he been through enough?” I asked.

“We know he’s frightened of the eyes,” Jorgen said. “And we want to see if we can get him to move the box.”

Rig had already removed the slugs who had been hanging out in the metal box. I went over to the crate and gave the slugs a couple of

mushrooms. If we weren't relying on starvation to motivate them to teleport, there was no need for the poor things to go hungry.

"Okay," Rig said, handing Jorgen the box with Gill loaded into it. "Hold on to the box, and we'll see if we can get it to take you *and* the box with it wherever it goes."

"Wherever it goes?" Jorgen said. "We have no idea where it's going to go, and we want it to take me with it?"

"That tactic could have its uses," I said, "like for getting fighters out of trouble when they're being tailed by Krell. But it's not useful for going to meet with Cuna." I was still nervous about trying that—what if Alanik was right, and Cuna was merely another tool of the Superiority looking to control us?

Without Alanik though, Cuna was our only option. If Alanik's people didn't want to be our allies, we were still going to need help if we expected to escape from the Superiority.

"I don't think it's going to take you far," Rig said. "None of the taynix have left the immediate vicinity. You're not going to get carried off the platform."

"So getting them to travel across the universe is its own problem," I said.

"Right," Rig said. "But one thing at a time."

"Fine," Jorgen said.

"Fine!" Fine piped up from over in the crate.

Jorgen drew a deep breath, holding the metal box in his hands.

Nothing happened.

After a really long silence, Jorgen opened his eyes. "It's not working."

"Maybe it's not scared anymore," Rig said. "You showed it the eyes and nothing happened. If someone showed me the same scary image over and over again, I would stop being frightened of it."

"Good point," Jorgen said. "Maybe we need to think of something else that scares them?"

"Or use another slug," I said. I reached into the crate and pulled out Happy. "Let's try this one."

With Happy secured inside the box, Jorgen closed his eyes again.



And then, without warning, he disappeared.

“Owwww,” Jorgen said, and Rig and I spun around to find him lodged inside one of the cubbyholes filled with rolled-up design schematics. The rolls of papers were all crushed to the sides, and Jorgen’s body was folded with his knees up to his chin. The box with the slug in it was jammed in front of him, and he pushed it out, shoving it onto the floor with a clang. Jorgen swore.

I giggled, and Rig snickered and then started to laugh.

“It’s not funny!” Jorgen shouted.

“I think the evidence is against you there, Flightleader,” I said, though he was right. Sure, him being crunched up in that cubbyhole was amusing, but what if the slug had hyperjumped somewhere more dangerous, or smaller? The slugs were used to finding spaces for their own body mass, and we didn’t even know if they were perfect at that.

I think Rig had the same thoughts at the same time, because he crossed the room and helped Jorgen extract himself. Jorgen rubbed one of the bandaged cuts on his elbow.

“I don’t think we should test it like that again,” I said.

“Agreed,” Jorgen said. “I wonder if the slugs have more awareness when they’re teleporting an entire ship. It seems like bad design to use a creature to teleport that wants to crunch you into a tiny space.”

Rig nodded. “I’m still impressed we managed to make it work at all.”

“We did,” I said. “But what’s the point?”

“The point?” Jorgen asked. “Of learning to use the slugs as hyperdrives?”

“Of having hyperdrives that only teleport cytonics,” I said. “If it requires a cytonic to use a hyperdrive, and cytonics themselves can teleport without hyperdrives—”

“Maybe it comes back to the projections,” Rig said. “They project something frightening onto the inside of the box, and then a cytonic isn’t necessary. My team can work with the projector to see if we can get it to project inside a box we can install in a ship.”

“Besides,” Jorgen said, “*I* am a cytonic and I don’t know how to hyperjump. If I can make the slugs do it, we’re still up from where we were, even if there are easier ways out there.”

That was true, but something about it still bothered me.

Rig considered for a moment. “You might be right that the slugs are more aware of their size when they’re taking a whole ship with them. M-Bot might also have had some way to deal with being placed in a small space, though I’m not sure what it would have been.”

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“We don’t really have a choice,” Jorgen said. “Dangerous or not, we need to try this out in a ship.”

## Nine

We all agreed it would be best if Jorgen didn't try to use the hyperdrive for the first time while piloting a ship. Cobb granted us the use of one of the two-seater Dulo-class fighters, which had pilot and copilot seats side by side. The cockpit of the Dulo was still narrow, with the fuselage only a little wider than a Largo class. Even so, as I climbed in, the cockpit felt smaller than normal, like the fuselage was squeezing in on me.

Rig had bolted his metal box under the dash between the instruments and the floor, so the slugs couldn't hyperjump without taking the rest of the ship with them. He was already working on some duplicate boxes, in case we got this to work.

At least this time we weren't flying out into the black. The Krell hadn't pierced the debris belt in months, so chances were good I wasn't going to have to watch any of my friends get shot out of the sky today.

Didn't make it any easier to be in the pilot's seat again.

"You're sure we're ready for this?" I said to Jorgen as we climbed into the ship.

"No," Jorgen said. "But I don't think we can afford to wait. The engineers are working on the defenses, but they say they have no way to know if they'll ever be functional."

Jorgen settled in the copilot seat, shoulder to shoulder with me. This was going to take some getting used to; I was accustomed to having a bit more space from my flightleader while I was flying.

Jorgen checked on the slugs in the box. We had Gill and Happy in there, plus a couple other yellow slugs. We all agreed we needed to bring more than one, in case something went wrong and we lost some of them in transport.

"All right," Jorgen said beside me. "Let's do this."

I put on my headset and turned on my radio, setting the channel for Command, which in this case connected me with Rig.

“We’re ready,” I told him.

“Copy,” Rig said. “Skyward Flight, you are cleared for departure.”

I engaged our acclivity ring, and several other ships lifted out of the landing bay alongside us. We hadn’t gathered the entire flight, but Sadie, Kimmalyn, Nedd, and Arturo were all accompanying us in case we got into trouble. Jorgen jumped on the channel we shared with them—he was still flightleader, even if he wasn’t technically flying.

“Skyward Flight,” he said. “Descend to 100,000 feet and meet at coordinates 334-1280. Quirk and Sentry, you two fly ahead to scout the area for unexpected debris fall. Amphi and Nedder, follow us in point formation.”

Our flightmates sounded off, and then I accelerated. We flew at half a Mag until we’d slipped down through a gap in the belt of platforms, soaring beneath the lights that illuminated the planet from the debris layer.

Jorgen fidgeted nervously with the bandage beneath his chin. “You worried this won’t work?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m also worried that it will.”

That made sense. We needed to be able to get off Detritus, but I didn’t envy Jorgen being the key to it all. We knew how to hide on this hole of a planet and fight for our lives. Everything else was a great unknown.

“What did Alanik say to you?” I asked. “When she spoke in your mind right before she left?”

Jorgen was quiet for a moment, and I expected him to say it was classified, but he didn’t. “She said I was powerful. That I shouldn’t let other people control me.”

Huh. “Is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Why did you lie about it?”

Jorgen sighed. “It didn’t seem like a great thing to say in front of my mother. But I told Cobb the truth when he debriefed me.”

“Why do you think she said that?” Alanik seemed to have issues with authority, which made her fit right in with the Defiant League. She didn’t trust *us* either, though. Not that I could blame her.

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “Maybe on her planet the cytonics are in charge? It might feel foreign to her that people who can teleport across the galaxy on a whim would listen to a chain of command.”

“You don’t agree with that though,” I said. Jorgen was the champion of the chain of command. He knew protocol forward and backward, better even than Cobb did.

Jorgen shook his head. “It’s one thing to have power, but if you don’t direct it you can end up making huge mistakes and hurting people. There’s a reason Command is in control.”

“And the National Assembly?” I asked. “Do you think they should take command power away from the DDF?”

Jorgen shrugged. “I think they have a point. Our military shouldn’t head up diplomacy for the Defiant League.”

I gave him a look.

Jorgen sighed. “Neither should my mother, okay? They sent her to be the liaison to the *military*. She isn’t a diplomat.”

“Do we have people like that on Detritus?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “You did pretty well at it.”

I snorted. “I don’t have training as a diplomat.”

“No,” Jorgen said. “But no one here does. You’re a scudding better diplomat than my mother, that’s for sure.”

That wasn’t a comforting thought. We had a system for training pilots, for fighting the Krell. We’d spent generations perfecting it.

What would we do now that circumstances suddenly demanded different skills, skills we hadn’t valued as a people?

“We’re going to have to figure it out,” I said. “Quickly, if this works.”

Jorgen looked at the instrumentation. “We’re getting close to our heading. I’m going to focus on the slugs now.”

“All right,” I said. “Just...try not to hyperjump us anywhere dangerous, okay?”

Jorgen didn't respond. He still didn't know how to relay cytonic coordinates, which meant he'd have no control over where he sent us.

There was a lot more debris down here to crash into if the slugs decided to teleport us into a tight space the way they did with Jorgen in the engineering bay, but we didn't dare try this experiment outside the atmosphere where the remaining Superiority outposts might observe us.

Still, the slugs had only teleported meters away in the lab. None of them had left Platform Prime—I'd always been able to find them again. They weren't likely to choose this moment to take us light-years away. If they did, we'd still have a hyperdrive; we could figure out how to get back.

Except Spensa left with the same intentions, and now no one knew where she was—another reason Jorgen shouldn't try to hyperjump in a ship by himself.

I didn't think the *two* of us being lost in space was a huge step up.

As we reached the area we'd designated for experimentation, Kimmalyn and Sadie shot off ahead, canvassing the area in their sleek scout ships. I liked flying scout-class ships better than the heavier classes, and I was going to miss that maneuverability if we needed it.

"Call Rig," Jorgen said, his eyes closed behind his visor. "Tell him we're ready."

"Rig," I said over the general channel. "We're ready to begin."

"Everything's clear out here," Kimmalyn added. "No debris, no transport ships, nothing."

"Jerkface, you ready for this?" Arturo added.

"Tell them I'm ready," Jorgen said. But he was gripping the edge of his seat like he was terrified. I didn't think that was a personal affront to my flying.

"Jerkface is concentrating," I said. "He says he's ready."

"Try not to crash into us," Arturo said.

"She said Jerkface was concentrating," Kimmalyn said. "Like the Saint always said, 'A silent fool is a stealthy fool.'"

"Who are you calling a fool, Quirk?" Nedd asked.

"Not you," Sadie said. "You're never silent."

Nedd grunted. “Good thing I’m too dumb to know if that’s what she meant.”

“Tell them to cut the chatter,” Jorgen said.

“Guys, stay off the channel,” I said. “And track us on your proximity sensors. We may not move far, but we’ll need to prove if we *did* move.”

The channel went quiet, and I glanced at Jorgen.

“You look like you’re going to throw up,” I said. “Don’t do that in my cockpit.”

“I’ll try not to,” Jorgen said. “Do you think we’re doing this too soon?”

“No. I think we’re doing what needs to be done. But if you don’t relax, you might scare that slug enough to hyperjump us a lot farther than we want to go.”

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “I don’t know if that’s how it works. I’m trying to relax.”

“You could hum again.”

Jorgen opened one eye and glared at me.

I was joking, but that gave me another idea. “Here,” I said, reaching for my transmitter. “Maybe this will help.”

I flipped on the transmitter and chose a slow, beautiful piece, played by only a few string instruments. We had banjos and fiddles on Detritus, but the sounds that came out of those were pale shadows of the long, melodious notes soaring from my transmitter.

Jorgen opened his eyes, and his shoulders did relax a little. “Where did you get that?”

“From my father,” I said. “Isn’t it beautiful? This is the one I listen to when I’m nervous.”

Jorgen took a deep breath. “It’s wonderful.”

It was so sad that while we had this music, we didn’t play it publicly. On Earth, music used to play over the radio all the time. Tune in to an FM channel and you could listen to anything you wanted. It was incredible to me that the air used to be filled with these waves. That was why I picked FM as my callsign: it thrilled me that the initials of my name—Freyja

Marten—were the same as the term for music that used to be so widely available.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

Jorgen nodded. He did seem a little more relaxed.

I flipped on the radio again, not bothering to turn off the transmitter. “Rig, are we cleared to hyperjump?”

“Cleared, FM,” Rig said. “When you’re ready.”

“Scud, here it goes,” Jorgen said.

For a moment the music ascended, but nothing else happened. I tightened my grip on my controls, looking out over the barren surface of the planet. We were too high up to see the craggy patterns of the surface, and too far from the debris belt to distinguish more than the largest platforms and pieces of debris. Suspended in the middle, flying at Mag-1 so I’d have more control if we needed to fall into evasive maneuvers. Beside me Jorgen breathed in deeply, and the music dropped into a series of quick, low notes that aligned with my heartbeat.

Maybe this wasn’t working. Maybe something was wrong. Maybe—

I blinked, and a chunk of metal debris appeared in front of my ship, bearing down on us.

No. We were bearing down on *it*.

I pulled up, narrowly missing the debris as I slipped into the crack between two large chunks of metal that spun freely in the debris belt—remnants of the systems up here that had long since started to disintegrate. Beside me, Jorgen snapped his eyes open and gasped in surprise as I slipped around the debris and shot downward—at least I thought it was downward; I’d lost all my bearings when we teleported.

“Look out!” Jorgen shouted, and too late I saw the chunk of rock our boosters had destabilized spinning toward us. We rammed straight into it, cracking our shield, and I rolled the ship to the side to avoid colliding into another piece of debris.

“FM!” Rig said over the radio. “You guys okay?”

Jorgen grabbed the radio. “Rig, where the scud are we?”



“I’ve located you in the debris belt. You’re deep in an unstable area. I’m trying to find the best heading for you to get out.”

“Scud!” I said, slowing our speed as I wove between large pieces of debris that looked like a platform broken apart at the seams. “Tell him to do it quickly.”

“Now, Rig,” Jorgen said. “We need that heading now!”

I swept between two pieces of the platform, but they moved toward me instead of away, folding in on each other as if on a hinge. I accelerated, but Jorgen put a hand on my shoulder.

And then suddenly we materialized just past the edge of the folding platforms. I watched on my monitors as the monstrous shapes clapped against each other behind us.

“What did you do?” I asked, swinging us around another chunk of debris.

“I focused on the space where I wanted us to go,” Jorgen said. “I think I can give the slugs an instruction for where to run, as long as I can see the space I want them to run to. I might be able to do it if I can visualize the place and it’s somewhere they recognize. We’ll have to experiment with that though.”

The section of the debris field in front of us was a little looser, and I continued to weave through the debris as the music swelled in long, slow swoops. *Calm*, I thought. *Focus*. I found a portion of the debris belt with wider, more open spaces and circled around and around while Rig worked on that heading.

“We could experiment now,” I suggested. “You could visualize the space over Platform Prime and see if the slug will take us there.”

Through his visor, Jorgen grimaced. He didn’t respond.

“Jerkface,” I said, “you okay?”

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “But I think—I think that second time something heard me.”

“Heard you?” I asked. “Like, cytonically?”

“Yeah,” Jorgen said.

My heart dropped. “A delver?”

Jorgen shook his head. “I don’t think so. It was like—like it was surprised. It heard me reach out to the taynix, and it was shocked I was there. Like I opened a door and startled the person on the other side.”

“If it wasn’t a delver, and it wasn’t a taynix—” The only other cytonic on the planet that we knew about was Spensa’s grandmother, though she knew about Jorgen, so she shouldn’t be surprised. “Are there more of you? Because we could use—”

Jorgen shook his head. “I don’t think it was us,” he said. “I think it was *them*.”

*Oh.* The Superiority? We knew they had cytonics, and it made sense that there would be one or two assigned to the battleships parked near Detritus, especially if they used cytonics to run their hyperdrives. “If they heard you —”

“Then they know what we’re doing,” Jorgen said. “They might have sensed what we did just now. I don’t know that I want to try it again right away with them listening.”

That did seem unwise. If they knew we were developing hyperdrives, what would they do to us?

“Okay,” Rig said over the radio. “I’ve got coordinates for you. You’re going to need to move away from Platform Prime to a more stable part of the debris belt you can cut through to come back down.” Rig gave us some coordinates, and Jorgen put them into the nav system. I accelerated a bit more and swung around chunks of debris that were almost as big as Platform Prime, but twisted and battered.

Jorgen switched the radio to the general channel, and I lowered the volume on my transmitter, but didn’t turn it off.

“Amphi?” Jorgen said. “Nedder? You guys okay?”

“You’re alive,” Arturo said. “Scud, Jerkface, you just *disappeared*.”

“That’s what he was trying to do, wasn’t it?” Nedder said.

“Right, but I didn’t expect him to actually *do* it. Where are you guys?”

“Up in the debris belt,” Jorgen said. “I’ll send you the coordinates where we expect to emerge, and you can escort us to Platform Prime.”

“Did you really hyperjump?” Sadie asked. “What was it like?”

I flipped on my radio. "Like being in one place and then suddenly being in another."

"Um, guys?" Rig said. "The command center is filling up. I think they're going to take my channel soon."

"Take your channel?" Jorgen asked. "Why?"

"Hang on. Let me find out."

Jorgen and I looked at each other.

"We got those coordinates," Arturo said. "Moving your direction."

Through the chunks of metal below us, I caught sight of the surface of the planet.

"Skyward Flight," a familiar voice said over the radio. Cobb, taking over from Rig. "I'm going to need you all to report back to Platform Prime immediately."

"Why, sir?" Jorgen asked over the radio.

"We've got movement from the battleships," Cobb said. "It looks like they're pulling their largest ship into position, the one with the planetary weapons."

Stars. "The *what*?" I asked.

"Sir," Jorgen said. "Did you say *planetary* weapons?"

"Affirmative," Cobb said. "We knew from the chatter on the datanets that they had missiles they could use to bombard the planet. They hadn't shown any sign of using them, but they're moving into position now."

"Do you think that's because of us?" I asked Jorgen.

"I don't know," he said. "But it seems like too much of a coincidence not to be."

"Better tell Cobb then, yeah?" I asked.

Jorgen nodded. "Sir, we were successful in our mission, but when we were, I think the Superiority cytonics heard us."

There was a pause, and in it I imagined Cobb swearing up a storm. "They may have decided it's time to annihilate us. Can you use the taynix to get any of us off the planet?"

"Negative," Jorgen said. "I think I can teleport to places I can see or maybe remember, but that's it."

“Copy, Flightleader. Get back here as fast as you can.”

I swallowed and resisted the urge to turn up the music again.

We weren't ready. We couldn't run, not without full control over the hyperdrives, and the Superiority wanted to destroy us before we got that far.

If they attacked at full capacity now, would any of us survive?

“We're on our way,” Jorgen said to Cobb as I broke through the edge of the debris belt. Arturo and Nedd both fell in behind us in flanking position, with Kimmalyn and Sadie leading the way to Platform Prime.

“There has to be some way we can use the hyperdrives to our advantage,” I said to Jorgen.

Jorgen nodded. “Admiral,” he said over the radio, “we can't use the hyperdrives to flee, but I think we could bring them to bear in the battle.”

Cobb was quiet. “You're too valuable a resource to risk,” he said finally.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “But if we don't make it through this, it won't matter what we hold back, will it?”

It was a good point, if a sobering one.

“All right,” Cobb said. “Tell me what you have in mind.”

# Ten

When we arrived at Platform Prime, the landing bay was in chaos. Much like before the battle where the delver arrived, pilots raced for their ships as they received last-minute instructions, an air of nervousness permeating it all. I brought my ship down next to Skyward One, Jorgen's usual ship. Rig and two of his fellow engineers were standing around it with the canopy open, and Rig motioned to them furiously.

Jorgen opened the hatch and hopped out.

"Cobb said you were switching to your own ship," Rig said. "We took the interference module out of Alanik's ship and installed it in yours. If the information we took from her databanks is correct, it'll stop the enemy from projecting illusions into your head. You also have five yellow taynix in a box under your dash. It isn't pretty, but it's bolted in place, so the slugs won't teleport without you. Will you be okay with no one to help you with them?"

"I'll be all right," Jorgen said. "We need you to fly with FM in the Dulo."

Rig looked at Jorgen with terror. "I'm not a pilot, Jorgen. I barely started flight school."

"And you're not piloting today," Jorgen said. "We're going to try to use the hyperdrives to launch a surprise attack on the ship with the planetary assault cannon. The goal is to disable their cannons so they can't destroy Platform Prime or hit the surface of Detritus. The thing is, we don't know exactly how these weapons work. We don't know how to destroy them, or if we can. But if we send you in there, and you get a good look at the guns—"

"Then maybe I can help figure out how to disable them." Rig nodded.

"Command won't let me do it myself," Jorgen said, "but I can feel the slugs in my mind from a distance. I don't need to be right next to the slugs to communicate with them. So, we're going to send you in with FM. You won't be up there alone—they're willing to let me command Skyward

Flight to back you up because I'm going to have to see where I'm sending you. Also, I'll be able to use the hyperdrive to pull you out if things go wrong."

I wasn't thrilled about the plan myself—once I was in there, theoretically Jorgen should be able to teleport me out if something went wrong. But it was all *very* theoretical. This wasn't a suicide mission, but it was the closest thing I'd ever done.

I wasn't Spensa. I didn't enjoy running headlong into danger and figuring things out as I went along. But I also wasn't going to let my entire planet be destroyed because I wasn't willing to do what needed to be done. I was a pilot. I signed up for this. I was going to do the best I could to make sure that as many people came out of this alive as possible, even if I wasn't among them.

Taking Rig with me was another matter entirely.

"He can't order you to do it," I said to Rig. Rig knew that of course, because he wasn't in Jorgen's chain of command, but it seemed like a good moment for a reminder. "And Cobb hasn't ordered you to do it either." Cobb understood the reasons a pilot might have for not getting into a ship again. Cobb had done it when he felt he had to, but he wasn't going to make that decision for someone else. He hadn't ordered *me* to do this either—it was too experimental, too volatile.

Rig nodded. "I know. I'll do it."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Jorgen gave me a sharp look. Rig had just agreed, which was obviously what we needed.

But I didn't feel good taking someone up into battle with me on a mission this dangerous unless they were sure they wanted to be there.

"Yes," Rig said. He motioned to a box next to him. "We have one more taynix, in case we need it." He hoisted the box into the Dulo, with Chubs looking contemplatively over the edge. Rig climbed into the copilot seat beside me. He squirmed a little, scrunching himself up on the side of the seat farthest from me, even though I wished he'd sit closer. He put on his helmet.

Scud, I hated this. He'd dropped out of flight school for a reason, and he hadn't ever wanted to come back, not like Kimmalyn or Nedd. If I got him killed, that was on me. In my mind I saw Lizard's ship exploding, the wreckage spiraling toward the planet.

Not Rig. I didn't want that to happen to him. I couldn't let it.

It didn't feel like a comfort to know that if he died in this fight, I was likely going with him. "You really don't have to do this," I said. I *hoped* he would back out, even though I needed his help.

This was exactly why having complicated feelings for someone in a situation like this was a bad idea.

"I know I don't have to," Rig said. "But Jorgen is right. You shouldn't be working a hyperdrive alone, especially since you don't actually have control over it."

"We'll be fine," I said with a confidence I didn't feel. "I have a perfect record of not dying in combat."

Rig laughed, but it sounded forced. He was avoiding my eyes again. At least this time he was clearly terrified of the combat and not of me.

"I'm going to do my best not to get you killed up there," I said. I would. I *had* to.

"I believe you," Rig said. "But it's not always under your control, is it?"

Of course it wasn't. I could never guarantee that I was going to return from any mission, much less that I could keep anyone else safe.

That was what worried me.

Next to us, I could see Jorgen checking his ship, getting ready to take off. Kimmalyn, Sadie, and the others were hovering in the air, waiting for rendezvous coordinates. T-Stall and Catnip had joined them.

"This new planetary weapon," I said. "Isn't it the kind of thing that shield you're working on is supposed to defend against?"

"It could be if the shield worked," Rig said. "But we haven't tested it. If we turn it on, maybe nothing will happen. Or parts of the system might come online, but others might be too damaged to function. The debris around Detritus is in bad shape. The system might fail. Worse, it might short out, making it harder to use in the future."

“And at worst?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rig said. “We haven’t had time to map out all the ramifications. If there are shorts on important platforms, there could be considerable damage.”

“To Platform Prime?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rig repeated. “That’s why it’s too volatile to try until we have time to work up the likely scenarios. But we’ve given a full report to Command about what we know and what we don’t. It’ll be up to Cobb to decide what to do with it.”

Jorgen had a point about the command structure. It did make sense for power to be organized so it could be used efficiently. But then everything depended on the decision-making of the person at the top. Cobb I trusted. Jeshua and the Assembly, less so.

Jorgen’s ship lifted off, and I engaged my acclivity ring, lifting up beside him.

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said over the radio, “our orders are to engage the fighters protecting the battleships. We cannot let them destroy Platform Prime or penetrate the debris field to hit the surface of the planet.”

“Skyward Five, ready.” I said over the radio.

When the rest of the flight had sounded off, we followed our navigation track through the maze of upper platforms.

“We’re going to be in the center of the battle today,” Jorgen said. “Our orders are to hang behind Victory and Valkyrie Flights as they punch up toward the battleship.” Jorgen wasn’t going to talk about the other part of our mission over the radio, where there was even the slightest chance the enemy might be able to intercept the message. “FM is in the Dulo today with Rig.”

“Wait, *Rig* is flying with us?” Kimmalyne said. “Welcome back, Rig!”

“Tell them thanks,” Rig said.

I pointed at Rig’s radio controls. “Tell them yourself.”

He switched on his radio. “Thanks, Quirk,” Rig said. “I’m um...not totally against being here.”



“From Rig, that’s a resounding endorsement,” I said, and he gave me a weak smile. He relaxed in the seat a little, so our shoulders touched, and that at least was a comfort.

“I do intend to keep you alive,” I said to him.

“We’re flying toward a bunch of aliens who intend the exact opposite,” Rig said. “Especially once they realize we have a hyperdrive, even if it’s not a very effective one, and that we’re there to destroy their cannon.”

“Rig, FM, you have the device ready?” Jorgen asked over a private channel as we cleared the platforms and shot out into the black.

Beside me, Rig opened up the box and looked at the taynix.

“Do you know which one Jorgen already used?” he asked.

“I don’t,” I said. “Maybe swap them all out?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” He pulled out the four taynix already in the box and swapped them for the one he’d brought with him. Happy stretched out across his knee, trilling softly. I reached over and scritchd him behind his frill.

“Ready,” I told Jorgen over the radio.

“That’s an overstatement,” Rig muttered beside me. “But we’re as ready as we are right now.”

I laughed. That felt both profound and terrifying. I put a hand on my transmitter. “How do you feel about music?” I asked.

“I liked that song you were playing before in the lab. Do you have any others?”

“Yes,” I said, and I turned on my transmitter, flipping through the short list of pieces before selecting one.

This one was heavier than the one I played for Jorgen. I had no concept of what instruments could possibly make these sounds. There was a melody buried underneath a lot of shouting in a language I didn’t understand. But the beat was clear and the sounds were oddly engaging, even as loud and angry as they seemed.

Rig listened for a moment and then wrinkled his nose. “Is that music? Are you sure?”

“It is,” I said. “It just takes a refined taste to appreciate it.”

The flight accelerated together, moving toward the battleships in a standard V formation. My proximity sensors began to pick up ships—lots of them, though not yet as many as we'd faced when the delver arrived.

More alarming, the larger ships were now moving toward Detritus. Up to this time they'd stayed in place—a waypoint, not a danger themselves.

The music continued its relentless march as we continued to accelerate up to Mag-8. Outside the debris field, there was so much, well, *space*. The ships loomed in the distance, but even at high speeds it took us a long while to approach.

A while in which I was increasingly aware of Rig sitting next to me. Our arms were touching now, from shoulder to elbow, warming my whole body. Scud, this was not what I was supposed to be thinking about when I was heading into combat. It was like I told Sadie during the last fight: I had to *focus*. I wasn't used to having anyone in the cockpit with me during a fight, let alone a guy who liked me.

He did still like me, right?

"I'm not sure this music is getting any better," Rig said.

"Fine," I said. "I'll turn it off."

"No, you don't have to," Rig said quickly, but I'd already reached for the dial, searching for another song. I didn't share my music with many people, which was probably selfish. It wasn't that I wanted to keep it all to myself—more that I didn't want to share it with anyone who wouldn't appreciate it. It was the one thing that connected me to who we used to be, before our people crashed on Detritus and were reduced to nothing but survival.

I probably shouldn't have chosen one of the weirder pieces in my collection to share with Rig. So I decided to pick something a little easier to appreciate.

I chose a choral piece, also in a different language, one my father said had fallen out of use long before humans left Earth. Dozens, maybe hundreds of voices all blended together, singing with different tones and pitches, loud and yet somehow soft all at once.

"Oh," Rig said. "Stars, that one's beautiful. Are any of those instruments?"

“I don’t think so. Just voices.”

“Wow.” Rig petted Happy absently on his knee, and the slug began to trill along with the music, adding another high-pitched tone to the voices. Gill edged his way over, nuzzling my thigh.

“You have to like this one,” I said. “Even slugs appreciate it.”

Rig narrowed his eyes at me, and I laughed and smacked him on the hand.

I wished I had the guts to do more. I wished the battle wasn’t coming up so fast. Scud, another carrier ship had arrived, and more fighters poured out of it. It seemed incredible that they’d gotten here so fast, but the Superiority had working FTL communicators. They had hyperdrives that went where they told them to go, and the ability to call up their pilots and transport them across the vastness of space in moments.

We’d made progress, but we were still so scudding far behind it made me want to cry.

Not now. This wasn’t the moment to lose my composure. My flight was depending on me. Rig was depending on me. Detritus was depending on me.

The ships splayed across my proximity sensors as we rapidly approached the battlefield. This time we’d brought the fight to them.

I wished I thought that would give us enough of an edge for the victory to be decisive.

“We’re as ready as we are right now,” I said.

Rig nodded. “No more, no less.”

Several of the enemy ships broke away from the pack, heading toward us.

“Here we go,” I said, and we streaked toward them through the black.

# Eleven

Our flight cut up through the center of the battlefield in the wake of Valkyrie and Victory Flights, who were both tasked with getting us close enough to the gunship for Jorgen to see a clear path to it. Jorgen needed a visual on the place he was going to send us to be sure we'd actually arrive.

The enemy ships fanned out, intercepting our fighters as they moved toward the gunship. There had to be a way to take that thing down, or the Superiority forces wouldn't be so determined to defend it. We didn't need to destroy it, only disable the orbital weapons before they had a chance to damage Detritus.

I soared with the lift of the music toward the incoming enemy ships and peppered them with destructor fire. I immediately picked up a couple of tails, and Sadie and Kimmalyn fell into position behind me, ready to fire after I took down the enemies' shields.

I reversed my boosters, slowing me down. In atmosphere, the drag of air resistance did this work for me, but up here I had to do it myself. The other ships quickly caught up and I did a barrel roll to avoid their destructor fire, though some of it crackled across my shield.

"Scud," Rig said, gripping the dash. "I forgot how disorienting this is." Still, he leaned over the proximity monitor, scanning it quickly. "Roll right," he said. "They've got a friend joining them. If you pass between the two you can get all three of them with your IMP."

"Done," I said, and I rolled to the side and then engaged my boosters to send my ship backward through the enemy fire. My shield cracked further, but it didn't matter. I hit my IMP, dropping my own shield as well as the shields of all three enemy ships. Sadie and Kimmalyn opened fire while I used a series of defensive maneuvers to avoid the enemy destructor fire.

Beside me, Rig squeezed his eyes shut. "Yep, don't miss this part," he said.

“It’s probably worse when you’re not in control,” I said.

“Oh, no,” Rig said. “I’d much rather you were in control than me.”

“Flight,” Jorgen said. “Converge on the gunship. Victory and Valkyrie have cut us a path.”

I reignited my shield, and we fell into an M formation as we worked our way up the battlefield. “Incoming,” Arturo said, and I glanced at my proximity monitors to see five ships coming in to break up our path. The enemy wasn’t stupid. They knew we were trying to get close to the battleship to destroy it.

Though if they sent all their reinforcements into the fray to fight us, they wouldn’t have any to defend the guns once we reached them. Skyward Flight broke formation, falling into evasive maneuvers.

“Amphi, Nedder,” Jorgen said, “lead those ships away from the rest of the flight. T-Stall, Catnip, back them up.”

“It’s working,” Rig said, scanning the monitors. “They’re not holding anything back to defend the gunship. Why would they do that if they know we have a hyperdrive?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe because they don’t use their hyperdrives this way. Can you imagine what would happen if they hyperjumped in a lifebuster and detonated it over Alta Base? And yet they never do.”

“Cobb says they’re careful with the technology,” Rig said. “They don’t trust it to individual fighters, for fear of losing control of the secret to FTL travel. Once people know how it works, the smaller planets will be able to use it, and the Superiority will lose control.”

If that was so, control came at a massive cost. There had to be a way we could use that against them.

But first we had to survive.

The battleship loomed larger in the distance, and Jorgen opened a private channel with me. “Okay, FM,” Jorgen said. “I can see the area in front of the battleship well enough now that I think I can direct the device. Are you ready?”

“Ready as we are right now,” I said.

“I don’t know what that means,” Jorgen replied.

“I’m ready, sir,” I said. The right answer, even if it wasn’t strictly true. There was no “ready” for this.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “I’m focusing on the device on your ship.”

Happy vanished from Rig’s lap.

Scud.

Jorgen got the wrong slug.

“Sorry!” Jorgen shouted over the radio, just as one of the ships the others had distracted turned and fired its destructors toward us. The arc of fire closed in, and Rig squeezed his eyes closed.

And then suddenly a battleship loomed directly in front of me, so close I had to roll to the side to keep from sailing right into it.

The ship was boxy, and clearly not designed to be flown in an atmosphere. Two massive doors across the front rolled to the side, revealing a round, glassy cannon inside.

“I’m thinking that thing is the planetary weapon,” I said to Rig. “Any idea where I should start shooting?”

“Not at the cannon itself,” Rig said. “It’s built to take fire. Your destructors won’t be enough to destroy it. The cannon controls will be much more vulnerable, but they won’t have those mounted on the outside of the ship where they can be easily shot. Try flying around the front again so I can get a better look.”

“FM?” Jorgen said over the radio. “Status?”

“Jump succeeded, Jerkface,” I said. “Evaluating target now.” I swung around and headed toward the fore of the ship, avoiding the area directly in front of the cannon. I didn’t know how quickly the thing could shoot, and I didn’t want to find out by having my ship blown to bits by a projectile designed to destroy a planet.

“Uh, FM?” Nedd said over the radio. “Where did you go?”

“Busy, Nedder,” I said.

“FM, you have incoming,” Jorgen said. “A bunch of Krell turned around and are flying straight toward you. Victory and Valkyrie are nipping at their heels.”

“Permission to give chase, sir?” Kimmalyn asked.

“Permission granted. Keep as many of those ships away from FM as you can.”

“There,” Rig said, pointing to something on the monitor. “Below the gun, there’s a shield to deflect incoming fire. I don’t know if it’s the cannon controls—could be the ship’s acclivity ring, if they have one, or propulsion systems.”

“Let’s find out,” I said. I dove down below the front of the ship, skimming the underside where Rig had indicated he’d seen the shield. Predictably, there was no big red button labeled “To Destroy Cannon, Press Here.”

But there was a hatch about the width of my wingspan with the door closed tight, and I blasted it with destructor fire. The shield held for a moment, and then broke, and the door blew off, flying into the cavity beyond. I didn’t get a good look inside the wreckage before more destructor fire came sweeping in from my six, and I ducked my ship under the door and circled around again, bobbing to avoid being blown to bits by the incoming enemy.

“Well, they found us,” I said. “So much for our lead.”

“They’re still at a disadvantage,” Rig said, scanning his monitors. “They’re scrambling to protect the ship and you just blew a hole in it. Can you get a look inside?”

Destructor fire sprayed toward me as I wove around toward the front of the ship. An eerie blue energy was collecting around the cannon, so I gave that a wide berth as I flew beneath it again.

And encountered an immediate barrage of destructor fire. There *must* be something important down there, because three enemy ships were circling the damage, defending it as the cannon charged up to shoot toward the planet. Several fighters from Valkyrie and Victory Flights flew in and surrounded the enemy ships, forcing them to scatter or have their hulls torn to pieces.

“FM?” Jorgen said. “The enemy forces are turning around on you. We’re doing the best we can to keep them off you, but we’re outnumbered. Let me know when you need me to pull you out.”

“Not yet,” I said. I joined the other fighters in scattering the enemy ships while Rig reached down and unlocked the box, pulling out a quivering Chubs, clearly rattled from making the hyperjump. I took Chubs from him and set him on my shoulder. That was when I realized I had no idea where Happy had gone.

Stars, was the slug wandering around somewhere in the vacuum? Some things could survive without atmosphere, but I had no idea if taynix were one of them. The idea of poor Happy lost and alone in the black made me want to cry again.

Which I still did not have the luxury of doing right now.

The choral piece was a long one, the music still wafting out of my transmitter. I circled toward the broken hatch again, destructors firing, dodging around enemy ships. I could see some machinery in the wreckage of the blasted door, though I had no idea what it was for. “Rig?” I asked.

“No clue,” Rig said. “I say shoot it.”

I opened fire. The bottom of the ship lit up, some of the blasts glancing off the hull and ricocheting out into the battle while others tore through the tech behind the hatch door.

Destructor fire cracked my shield, and I pulled an inverse backpedal, trying to get away from my pursuers. Three enemy ships had me in their sights though, and they followed me as I darted away from the bottom of the ship.

It had only been a matter of time before their command identified the ship with the hyperdrive. Two more ships joined them, and I launched into a complicated series of moves that kept them from frying my shield entirely.

This was it though. “Jerkface,” I said over the radio. “I need to retreat.”

“Copy,” Jorgen said.

Another blast obliterated my shield. One more, and we were gone.

The glass of my windshield abruptly went black.

Rig swore. “Are we dead?”

Sparks, thousands of them, all stared at me. Not eyes, but beautiful white stars, worlds away. “Not dead,” I said. My breath caught, I reignited my shield and then scanned the proximity monitor. We might be too far for



Jorgen to bring us back, especially with our exhausted slugs. The DDF would come after us if our fuel ran out, but only if there was a DDF *left* after this latest attack.

And my flight. What would happen to them?

“There,” Rig said, pointing on the monitor. I fired my boosters to turn the ship around at his direction. *There*. We were close enough to see the battle, though we were now *behind* the battleships, farther out in space.

A flash of yellow, and a taynix appeared on the dash. Happy.

He’d returned, alive and unharmed.

“Hey buddy,” I said, reaching over and scratching him under his spines. “Glad you’re okay.”

Chatter resumed over the radio.

“I got him!”

“T-Stall, Catnip, help Sentry shake her tail.”

“On it.”

“Stars, there are more of them!”

“Has anyone heard from FM?”

That last from Jorgen. “We’re here,” I said. “Coming up on the rear flank of the battle in—”

“Two minutes,” Rig said.

“Two minutes.”

“That far?” Jorgen asked. “I directed the slug to send you toward the platforms, but I guess it didn’t work.”

“No,” I said. “It sent us in the opposite direction.” That was worrisome, though I guessed we should have expected it from creatures who were reacting in fear.

“Glad you’re okay,” Jorgen said. “We’ll head to you. You might encounter resistance on that flank. Flight, disengage and skirt the left side of the battlefield to wrap around and meet with FM. FM, give us a bearing.”

Rig read one off over the radio, and the rest of the flight affirmed they were coming in our direction.

“Sitrep?” I asked Jorgen.

“Not good,” Jorgen said. “The battle has split into two. One contingent of enemy ships is protecting the battleships and the other is cutting through our forces, heading toward Platform Prime. The other flights were unable to disable the cannon, and—”

He cut off as a beam of hot white energy erupted from the gunship and hit one of Detritus’s gun platforms. Debris scattered out from the rubble belt, destabilized by the impact.

“They’re firing on the planet,” Rig said. “Our existing defenses can’t stop that.”

“Scud,” Jorgen said. “Cobb’s calling the retreat. All forces are to abandon the fight and return to Platform Prime.”

Was there going to *be* a Platform Prime to return to?

“Um,” Rig said, studying the monitor. “Looks like there are five ships headed our way. They may know we hyperjumped to get here.”

“We’re coming for you,” Jorgen said. “FM, evasive maneuvers until we get there. We’re not going to leave you behind.”

“Understood,” I said. Then, to Rig, “How long until those ships reach us?”

“Not long,” Rig said. “They’re moving fast.”

I reversed my boosters, slowing down to dogfighting speed.

Five ships. I couldn’t outrun or outgun them, and there wasn’t a lot of terrain to work with this far out. Under normal circumstances, I could speed away and hope they wouldn’t consider me worth following, but if the enemy knew I’d hyperjumped, they would assume I was a cytonic and pursue me relentlessly.

“Incoming,” Rig said. “Scud, they’re piloted ships, every one.”

“Hold on,” I said. I performed a Barrett sequence, a complex set of dodging loops that made me nearly impossible to target. Rig groaned and grabbed the dash. I might have apologized if I wasn’t currently saving our lives. I thought for a second that he might throw up, and I apparently wasn’t the only one. Happy slid over onto Rig’s lap and cuddled up against him, trilling softly.

I broke out of the Barrett and immediately went into a twin-scissor as all five Krell ships bore down on me, the space in front of me alive with destructor fire. One blast hit my shield, weakening it.

“Jerkface, how long until you get here?” I asked.

“We see you on the monitors,” Jorgen said. “Hold on.”

I couldn’t engage my IMP, not with this much heat on my tail. Destructor fire rained over us from all directions. The enemy had figured out a formation to make it nearly impossible to dodge the fire. I could tell by the way they flew that they weren’t as good as I was. But there were more of them. A lot more. Another blast hit my shield, then another. I went into a barrel roll, but it wasn’t going to be enough.

We weren’t going to make it out of this.

Suddenly, ships came flying in from my left—Nedd and Arturo, who used their IMPs to take down the enemies’ shields. One of the enemy ships continued to tail me as the others broke off to deal with the new threat. Kimmalyne picked off the ships with their shields down in two clean shots.

“Told you we were coming,” Nedd said over the radio. T-Stall and Catnip took out my last tail, then turned around and helped Jorgen chase down one of the last two ships. Jorgen moved in on it to get within IMP range—

And then Jorgen’s ship suddenly jerked to the side.

I tried to open a private line to him, but Jorgen didn’t pick up.

“Jerkface, you okay?” I asked over the general channel.

Nothing.

The enemy took advantage of Jorgen's apparent distraction, and turned and scored a direct hit. By the way his shields crackled, they were dangerously low. But at last he reacted, starting into an evasive pattern, and managed to lose his opponent.

“Skyward Flight, go defensive,” Jorgen said finally. “FM, cover me while I reignite my shield.”

“Sure,” I said, and followed on his wing as Jorgen slowed his ship and fell into a defensive position. The rest of the flight chased down the last two ships, then fell in with us while we waited for Jorgen’s shield to reignite. He was still headed away from the planet, when our orders were to go the other

way. Something had clearly gone wrong with him, and he still wasn't responding to my private hails.

"What's going on with him?" I asked Rig.

"No idea," Rig said.

Finally, Jorgen's shield reignited and his voice returned over the general channel. "Sorry," he said, though I wasn't sure what he was apologizing for. "Skyward Flight, reverse direction. Time to return to Platform Prime."

We all reversed direction, flying back with Jorgen at the center. "Cobb says the gunship has blasted holes through the debris field big enough to reach the surface," Jorgen said. "Another hit could destroy the apparatus and bury the caverns. All flights are to retreat below the platform belt—they're going to engage the planetary shield. I don't know what that means. Rig?"

"It might not work," Rig said. "But if it does, the platforms should move into position to protect the surface of the planet from bombardment."

I looked back toward the planet. There were two more large destabilized areas in the debris field now. While I'd been distracted, the battleships had continued firing.

"What about Platform Prime?" I asked. "Won't that still be vulnerable?"

"We don't know," Rig said. "But Platform Prime controls some vital planetary defense systems. Cobb said it wouldn't be good tactical strategy to install that on the outside of your shield."

"Regardless," Jorgen said, "they're relying on the gun platforms to defend Platform Prime while they get the shield up and running, and we are to head home at full speed."

I accelerated to Mag-9, and the rest of the flight kept pace with me. We were in this together.

And we watched together as suddenly, all throughout the debris field, the platforms began to move.

"Stars, is that happening?" Kimmalyn said.

"Looks like it," Arturo responded.

As far out as we were, we had the perfect view as the platforms began to rearrange themselves, edges extending toward each other. They spread out

over the surface of the debris field like ships with wings stretched in all directions, and a crackling blue glow formed over them like a thin film.

“What the scud is that?” T-Stall asked.

“Energy field,” Rig said. “There aren’t enough platforms to cover the entire atmosphere. The energy field stretches between, filling in the gaps. It’s also covering the platforms to protect them from—*that*.”

As he spoke, the battleship lit up its gun again, and the white energy hit the newly forming shield.

It bounced off, scattering in all directions. No debris flew off this time.

“It held!” Rig said. “By the North Star, it *held*.”

“Uh, guys,” Nedd said. “How are we going to get *through* it?”

Scud. As we flew closer, I scanned the planet. There were areas where the platforms were clearly damaged, non-functional, or missing. That made sense, given the amount of debris that had fallen out of the atmosphere and landed on the surface over the years. But the energy shields stretched over those areas, covering the gaps. The next blast from the battleship focused on one of these areas, but it didn’t crack through the shield.

“It’s working,” I said.

“Trust me,” Rig said. “No one is more surprised than I am.”

“Rig, what happens if we make contact with the shield?” Jorgen asked.

“Um,” Rig said, “I would not recommend that. At best it would interfere with your instrumentation, maybe make your controls malfunction. At worst, the energy might fry you.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So how do we get inside?”

“Um,” Rig said, “our exhausted hyperdrives maybe?”

“Guys?” Nedd said. “What are we going to do about the large force of enemy ships still hanging out right where we’re headed?”

I could see them on my proximity monitors, still trying to fire on the planet, chasing down the few ships that had been left outside the shield.

“I just heard from Cobb,” Jorgen said. “We’re going to run and hide.”

I supposed that was the only option we had left.

## Twelve

Jorgen gave us a heading to a cluster of space rock that had been too far out for the gun platforms to blast from the sky, but which was large enough for us all to hide within.

“Cobb agrees that we’re going to have to use the hyperdrives to get on the other side of the shield,” Jorgen said. “He can’t afford to drop the shield as long as the gunships are parked there. The engineers are working on how to turn off individual sections of the shield, but that will take time.”

“It might take *months*,” Rig said. “We could starve to death waiting for that, if we don’t run out of fuel and freeze to death first.”

“Right,” Jorgen said. “And we want several fresh taynix before we try, so we don’t end up getting stranded or stuck somewhere the Superiority can get to us. So we’re going to have to wait for all the slugs to...cool down, I guess? Calm themselves? We have time, because Cobb is sending our coordinates to the other ships caught outside the shield. The slugs bring everything that’s touching their box with them, so we’ll all huddle together and touch wings and try to hyperjump beneath the shield without losing anyone.”

“It would be easier if we had some way to interlock,” Rig said to me. “Like the Defiant Fleet ships used to do before they crashed here. When this is over, my team should work on that.”

I picked Happy up off his lap and scooped him into my arms. “Jerkface,” I said over the radio. “You should probably try to comfort your slugs. Might make them ready to use again faster.”

“*Comfort* them?” Jorgen said. “How do you want me to do that? Tell them a bedtime story?”

“You could try to hum again,” I said, mostly because I knew it would bother him.

“Don’t,” Rig added. “You wouldn’t want them deciding they’d rather face the vacuum of space than stay in there with you.”

“Very helpful,” Jorgen said. “Remind me to thank you.”

“Pick them up,” I said. “Pet them. Make them feel comfortable.”

We clearly should have brought some mushrooms with us, but I did have some caviar with me, which I pulled out of my pocket and scooped onto my finger, offering it to Happy. Gill trilled excitedly down by my knee. He crawled up the seat to sit on my armrest, lifting the front part of his body into a begging position. I laughed and offered him a scoop as well.

“I feel I should tell you,” Jorgen said over the radio, “that I now have a slug on each shoulder and three on my lap, all seeming vaguely uncomfortable that I’m touching them. I blame you, FM.”

“Be more gentle,” I said. “Quit squeezing them.”

“I’m not squeezing them! Have *some* faith in me.”

“You could always try that bedtime story,” Sadie added. “I could use one of those about now.”

“I’ll tell you one,” Nedd offered.

“Don’t,” Arturo said. “Nedder’s stories always end with everyone getting eaten by space monsters.”

“Hey!” Nedd said. “All the best stories end in people getting eaten. Isn’t that right, Sentry?”

“Um, I’ll pass, thanks,” Sadie said.

“Anyone else?” Nedd offered. “Quirk? FM?”

“Thanks, I’m good,” I said.

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn added.

I leaned back in my seat. According to the proximity monitors, the Krell hadn’t located us here. They’d no doubt be looking for the cytonic ship that escaped, but since they knew we had hyperdrives, they’d probably expect us to have escaped beneath the shield by now.

“I think we’re actually going to survive this,” Rig said. He sounded surprised.

“So little faith in my flying,” I said, smiling at him.

Rig smiled shyly, and I found myself paying far too much attention to his lips.

He'd been an asset today, even without much pilot training. I should probably tell him so, but instead I opened a private channel to Jorgen. "Jerkface?" I said. "What happened? After your shield dropped in that last skirmish? It seemed like your ship malfunctioned."

Jorgen was quiet for a minute. "I saw Spensa."

Rig and I exchanged a look. "What?"

"I saw Spensa, in a reflection in my dash. But it wasn't a reflection. It was *her*. I could feel her, same way I feel the eyes. Same way I found the slugs under the surface."

"Seriously?" I asked. "Where is she?"

"In the nowhere," Jorgen said. "In the place we travel through when we hyperjump. She's stuck in there, and she says it's supposed to be impossible to get out."

Beside me, Rig closed his eyes.

"She'll escape," I said to Jorgen, for both their benefits.

"That's what I told her," Jorgen said. "And I believe she will. But I wish she were back already."

"So do I," I said, though I imagined it was for very different reasons. "But it's Spin. She'll survive."

"I sure hope so," Jorgen said, and he closed the line.

Rig and I sat there in silence for a moment. My arm felt warm where it touched his, and the heat radiated through my body. Finally Rig muttered, "I can't believe you thought I was into Spensa."

I laughed. "You guys are close, right? So I just assumed—"

"We grew up together. She's like my *sister*. Not that I ever had a sister, but if I had one who was, like, *terrifying*, that's how I think it would feel."

"Okay, fine," I said. "I shouldn't have made that assumption."

Rig blushed. "Can we listen to that song again?" he asked, probably to change the subject. "The one with all the voices?"

"Sure," I said, turning my transmitter back on. The chorus filled the cockpit again, and the slugs began to trill along in perfect harmony. I ran a



hand down the fringe on Gill's back, hoping this was helping him to relax.

So we could scare him again. That still made me feel like a monster. These creatures were saving our lives, maybe were going to save our whole civilization.

And what did we do in return? Terrorize them.

In the copilot seat, Rig had two slugs stretched across his lap, and another particularly long one draped over his shoulders.

"I think we should name that one Drape," I said.

"I like that," he said, running a hand down the stomach of the thicker one on his knee that had rolled over for a belly rub. "I think this one is Twist."

"Nice."

"Hey," Rig said. "You kept your perfect record of not getting killed. I appreciate you not making an exception this time."

I smiled. "Thanks for your help. We made a good team up there."

"Yeah." Rig smiled, though he looked a little wistful, and I thought I knew why. "I'm glad we're friends," he said quietly.

I'd never told him that I only wanted to be friends. He'd assumed, and I supposed that was fair.

It just wasn't true. "It's definitely better than you ignoring me," I said.

Rig winced. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"You don't have to apologize. I get it."

"Still. I shouldn't have made things weird. It's not a big deal if you're not interested in me."

"Interested in me!" Happy trilled helpfully.

"Thanks, Happy," Rig said.

Scud, should I say something? I obviously *was* interested in Rig. I liked how competent he was, how confident he got when talking about something he loved. He was kind and quick-thinking, and we did work well together as a team.

And that smile. Stars, I could stand to see that smile every day for a long, long time.

No, it wasn't a lack of interest that held me back. It was the situation, the knowledge that any day I could fly out on one of these missions and never

come back. It had almost happened today—it could happen anytime. I depended on my flight and on the other pilots. I didn't know yet who we'd lost today, but I was betting there had been casualties in this battle, people I knew and liked. People such as Lizard, who would suddenly be gone, blinked out of existence like dying stars.

I didn't know if I was ready to form any deeper attachments than the ones I already had. I wasn't sure how Jorgen handled it, knowing Spensa would always be charging off into danger. If Rig hadn't been sitting right here, I might have called Jorgen and asked him.

Rig leaned back, closing his eyes and listening to the music. He wasn't sulking. More...*sad*.

I didn't like causing him pain, especially when he had the wrong idea. But was I ready?

*I'm as ready as I am right now*, I thought.

Maybe in this dangerous existence, that was as close as I was ever going to get.

"I didn't say I wasn't interested," I said finally.

Rig's eyes snapped open. "Really?" he said. He sounded doubtful.

"Yeah," I said. "I said I didn't know."

"Yeah, okay," Rig said. He continued to stroke Twist on the belly, and the slug took the high soprano part while Drape trilled alto from Rig's shoulders. He was so gentle with them, so sweet.

I'd have to be an idiot not to give this a chance, whatever the circumstances.

"Maybe I have a better idea now," I said. And then I reached over and took Rig's hand.

Rig's sharp intake of breath nearly made me let go, but then he relaxed, smiling. His cheeks turned a bright pink, but he didn't let go either.

We sat there listening to the swell of the music, neither of us speaking. A quiet peace overwhelmed me, and I closed my eyes, savoring it.

Maybe it wasn't just the slugs who had needed comforting.

Finally Jorgen's voice returned over the radio. "Cobb says the shield is holding and the gunship has stopped firing for now. Four other ships are

going to catch a ride with us when the slugs are ready. They're currently hiding on the other side of the rock cluster and I've invited them to this channel."

The pilots all called in, two from Ivy Flight, and one each from Riptide and Ranger, a scout flight we'd worked with before.

Stallion, assistant flightleader from Ranger Flight, piped up. "What's the plan out here? Command said you were going to take us home. Are we finding a hole in the shield?"

"Negative," Jorgen said. "We're going to use a hyperdrive."

There was silence over the line. "Repeat, Skyward One?" Stallion said. "Did you say a *hyperdrive*?"

"Affirmative," Jorgen said. "We have a hyperdrive on board, which we will use to get inside the planetary shield."

He sounded more confident about that than he probably was, given our adventures with the hyperdrives so far. Still, with the shield blocking entry to the planet, it was this or wait for our ships to run out of power for our life support.

"What's the matter?" Nedd asked. "Never used a hyperdrive before?"

"Ummmm," Stallion said.

"Where have you been?" Catnip added. "I use hyperdrives all the time. Used one on my way to the cleansing pods this morning, didn't I, T?"

"Totally," T-Stall responded. "I thought everybody had hyperdrives these days."

"All right," Jorgen said. "That's enough."

There was silence on the line for a bit, and then Stallion said what the other pilots all must have been thinking. "But seriously? A *hyperdrive*?"

"He's being serious," I said.

"If you say so," Stallion said.

I smiled. "I do."

Jorgen reopened our private line. "FM, how are your slugs doing?"

Gill looked a bit affronted that I'd stopped petting him when I took Rig's hand, but other than that they seemed relaxed. "Good," I responded. "Maybe ready? You could try and see?"

“I think we should use one of yours. Mine all seem pretty disgruntled.”

“Stop squeezing them.”

“I’m not! I swear!”

I laughed, and Rig joined me.

If we were preparing to hyperjump soon, I was going to have to let go of his hand. I mean, my elbow was kind of aching from being at an awkward angle on the armrest and my palm was sweating. But I still weirdly didn’t want to.

That probably meant something, but I was more comfortable with the idea of attempting a hyperjump than I was with thinking about that.

I let go of Rig’s hand, stretching my fingers. “Let’s try to put them all in the box, so Jorgen doesn’t get the wrong one again.”

“I’m a little worried they’re going to start expecting the scare the moment they’re put in the box,” Rig said. “I wonder if we should be keeping them in similar boxes when they’re off duty to acclimatize them.”

Much as I didn’t want the poor slugs consigned to living in dark boxes for their entire lives, his logic made sense. And I did like that he referred to them as being off duty instead of out of use, like they were creatures rather than objects.

“Let’s hope they haven’t totally made that connection yet,” I said. “Because I don’t know that we have time to acclimatize them to it now.” Rig and I wrangled the five slugs into the box, shutting them in.

“Okay,” I told Jorgen. “We’re ready.”

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said, “And...guests. Come join us up by the... curvy formation at the top of this rock. We’re going to need to get our ships close enough to touch wings.”

I looked out through the canopy to see what Jorgen was talking about—a wicked hooklike protrusion on the top of this piece of space rock. I engaged my acclivity ring to lift us up toward it, and the other ships clustered around us. Jorgen’s ship pressed close on our right until our wings touched, and I could see slugs perched precariously on each of his shoulders.

“They do look uncomfortable,” Rig said.

Kimmalyyn used her boosters to scoot up next to us on the left, giving me a bright smile and a thumbs-up through the glass.

“All pilots, confirm you are in position for hyperjump,” Jorgen said.

Everyone confirmed, though the new pilots sounded significantly less confident that we were in fact about to hyperjump.

“Skyward Five, we are a go,” Jorgen said.

And then the stars disappeared.

# Thirteen

Jorgen managed to get the slug to hyperjump us within a few kilometers of Platform Prime, which was several layers below the shield—a crackling, glowing net that stretched across the spaces between the platforms over our heads. We were greeted in the landing bay by Cobb and Jorgen’s mother, who looked happy for once. She ushered Jorgen off, telling him they needed to debrief.

“I can handle getting the slugs into their crates,” I told Rig. “I’m guessing you want to go talk to your friends in engineering about the shield.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got it.” The rest of my flight headed to the mess hall to wind down from the battle, but I waved them off too.

Usually I liked companionship after a battle, but today I wanted to be alone.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said to Gill, who rode on my shoulder while I toted the rest of the slugs toward Engineering in a box. “I should be happy.”

“Happy!” Happy said from the box.

“Yeah, exactly,” I said. No one in my flight had been hurt, despite several close calls. Rig and I were...something, though I didn’t know exactly what. I didn’t regret holding his hand—I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to regret that. We’d gotten the hyperdrives to work, sort of. Not enough to change the outcome of the battle, but enough to give us some hope.

But that was exactly it, I realized. I wasn’t sure what came next. We didn’t have a cytonic to teach Jorgen how to give coordinates to the slugs. We had a shield that was working for now, but there was no way it would hold up indefinitely. We had potential allies we still couldn’t reach, and a whole lot of enemies sitting on our doorstep.

We'd survived, but we were just as trapped on Detritus as we'd ever been—maybe more so. For a while we'd been able to reach into the expanse of space—and if our freedom had been measured in kilometers rather than light-years, it had been ours.

Now we'd lost all that, and the only way out was to rely on the whims of creatures who, while adorable, weren't easy to control. Jorgen could only do so much by himself. Even if engineering could replicate the holographic technology to outfit every ship with a functional box, there had to be a limit to how many hyperjumps he could track at once. The slugs had generally gone where he'd asked them to, but on that one jump he'd sent me in the opposite direction. That had worked out fine, but we couldn't guarantee that it always would.

And it would only be a matter of time before the Superiority figured out how to target and kill Jorgen. Without him we'd be lost.

We had to do better. *I* had to do better.

When I reached Engineering, I found Cobb in a meeting with Ziming and several of the other engineers. Rig waved to me, but one of Cobb's aides ushered me out, showing me to the room next door.

"We've decided to give the taynix their own space," she said. "We've been using this room to build boxes for the ships, but Rig said you wanted to start keeping the slugs in those full-time. You can start with the ones we have, and we'll build more as we go."

I stepped into the room, finding it filled with metal boxes the size of the one installed in the Dulo. The crates of slugs and mushrooms had been left in the middle of the floor, with the tools and materials for box building spread out around them. We were probably going to need to find a way to hold the boxes down so we weren't picking them up from all over the platform, but this would work for now.

"Thanks," I told the aide, and then I set the box of taynix on top of their crate and closed the door behind me.

"Thanks," Gill trilled on my shoulder.

"Thank *you*," I said, reaching into my pocket for my tin of caviar. It was almost gone, but I'd put in a requisition request to Cobb for more, and he'd

said he would speed that along. I wished I had enough to reward every taynix who helped us today, but I felt like I should conserve what I had left until the requisition order arrived.

What I could do, however, was feed them. I opened the crates and offered Happy, Twist, and the others some mushrooms. More of those were also supposed to arrive with the requisition order, though the mess hall had sent over a box of algae strips to try in the meantime.

I pulled one out of the package. “What do you think?” I asked Gill. He nudged the strip with his face, but didn’t open his mouth, instead nuzzling my finger for more caviar. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I offered Gill a mushroom and then sat down, watching the slugs happily eat, prolonging the time before I had to shove them each into a dark box to become comfortable in hard, cubic containers.

Trapped until they were useful to us, without even an apparatus to build spacecraft to fight back.

I sat down and leaned against the side of the crate, the tears I’d held back before burning at my eyes.

It was stupid to worry about the plight of the slugs. There were human beings who would continue to die—people I knew, people I loved. Unless we figured out a better way to use the hyperdrives, they would all be lost, the slugs taken away by the Superiority to be used in their ships.

The tears escaped from the corners of my eyes.

Maybe that was the problem. I wasn’t only worried about the slugs, or only about my people. I was worried about *all* of us.

“I’m sorry about your part in this,” I said to Gill.

“This!” he repeated enthusiastically.

The door opened, and I startled, wiping my face with the back of my hand. Rig saw though, and he came in and closed the door behind him.

“You okay?” he asked, sitting down on the edge of a table near the crate.

“Sure,” I said. “Fine. Great.”

“Fine!” one of the red slugs piped up with its deeper trill from the crate behind me.



“My team took Fine up to the communicator,” Rig said. “Cobb wants to try scaring the slugs into sending a message to Cuna, now that we know how it should work. They’re prepping Jorgen for it now.”

“Fantastic,” I said. It didn’t sound like I meant it, and I wasn’t sure I did.

Rig looked at me sympathetically, which I should have appreciated, but instead it made me want to hide. That was what I was doing in here originally, I realized. Hiding from my friends, from Command, from everyone.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what there is to say.”

“I’ll start,” he said. “That was terrifying today. The hyperdrives worked, and the politicians are thrilled about that, but that’s because they weren’t in a ship being teleported right to the heart of the battle. That was scudding scary.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean for you to get caught up in that.”

“We’re *all* caught up in it,” Rig said. “And I’m not sorry I was there.” His cheeks went pink, so I didn’t think that was merely because he wanted to help with the war effort.

“It was scary,” I said softly. That wasn’t something I would usually admit after a battle. The flight liked to gather together and reenact our successes with dinner rolls and algae strips as stand-ins for ships. Except on missions when we lost someone, we all put on a brave face, mocked each other, and laughed about it until our nerves faded away.

That was probably what I should be doing now. So why didn’t I want to?

“Do you need me to keep going?” Rig asked. “I can list a lot of things I think are scary.”

“Is that supposed to help?” I asked. “Making a list?”

“Talking about it might help. If you’re not ready, I’ll continue. I’m terrified for Spensa. Being stuck in the nowhere seems like a really bad thing, and even though we all say Spensa will get out, can we guarantee that, really?”

“No,” I said.

“No,” he agreed. “And a few days ago there was a *delver* on our doorstep, and I’m still not sure why it didn’t kill us all or when it will be back.”

Rig had insisted it wouldn’t be back if Spensa could help it. I wasn’t surprised that was mostly bravado. “Did the delver look as freaky on the monitors down here as it did out there?” I asked. “Because I have never seen anything like that, and I hope that I never do again.”

“It was horrifying!” Rig said. “I nearly crapped my pants.”

I laughed.

“Okay, your turn,” Rig said. “What are you afraid of?”

“Not coming back,” I said. I hadn’t realized how deep that fear went until I said it out loud. I felt it in my bones. “Dying in battle. Ceasing to exist. Being the scar my friends won’t acknowledge or talk about.” I paused. “And the opposite of that, being the last one left.”

“Yeah, that’s enough to give you nightmares.”

I nodded. “No wonder it’s so hard to keep it together.”

“Seriously?” Rig asked. “You seem like you *always* have it together.”

“Is that what you like about me?” I asked. “Because I don’t have it together. I just don’t talk about it.”

“Clearly you should,” he said.

That wasn’t an answer to the question, and I found myself suddenly self-conscious. I crossed my arms, leaning back against the crate.

Why did I care what Rig liked about me? I didn’t usually give much thought to anyone’s impression. I showed up and did my job and tried to protect my friends; if people didn’t like me personally, so be it. Maybe it was better that way. The closer I got to people, the worse it felt when I lost them.

Had I always felt that way? No, not before flight school. Not even after. This was recent. A defense mechanism, I guessed.

It wasn’t one I particularly liked.

“Is that why I like you?” Rig said. “I don’t know. Maybe a little. I like how steady you are, how confident. I’m always so anxious about everything. I’ve wondered what it’s like to be, well, *not*.”

“Are you disappointed to realize I’m not really like that?”

“No,” Rig said. “More relieved.”

I stared at him.

“What?” he said. “You think I want you to be some emotionless robot? It’s *good* to have feelings, FM. It’s good to express them. And it’s kind of nice to know that I’m not the only one who’s terrified.”

“You’re not,” I said.

“I know. But we all show it in different ways. Spensa picks fights and threatens to murder you. Jorgen gets all tangled up in his rulebook. You pretend to be fine.”

“Fine!” Gill trilled.

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “What about you?”

“I stress,” Rig said. “And I work on hard problems and try to fix them. When Spensa disappeared the first time, I spent a full week trying to deconstruct a navigation system we found in the planetary defenses. I think it’s supposed to interface with the ship nav systems so everyone can coordinate better during flight.”

“But you didn’t figure it out?” I asked.

“No,” Rig said. “There are too many pieces we don’t understand yet. It kept me sane for a while, but then I just felt like a failure.”

“You’re clearly not a failure. You figured out how to improve our ships based on M-Bot’s design. You’re the main reason we were able to use the hyperdrives at all, even if they aren’t perfect yet.”

“We all worked on that,” Rig said.

“Still. Not a failure.”

“I know,” Rig said. “I just always feel like I should be doing more. If I could figure everything out faster, more lives would be saved. Every time someone dies in combat, there was more I could have done to prevent it.”

Huh. I felt that way, but I hadn’t thought about the people who stayed here on the ground feeling responsible for our deaths. “You’re doing the best you can though. No one can ask more than that.”

“Right. Does that make you feel better when your friends don’t come back?”

“No,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“Exactly,” Gill agreed.

“You’re certainly being chatty today,” I said, offering him another mushroom. I looked up at Rig. I wished he’d sit closer, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to suggest it.

He was right. It was good to talk. But the more I did, the more exposed I felt, like he could see right through me.

I didn’t like anyone seeing what a mess I really was, least of all him.

“Did you feel like a failure when you dropped out of flight school?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said. “It was Spensa’s dream, not mine. I felt more... directionless. Like I wasn’t sure what I wanted to be, but I knew it wasn’t a pilot.”

“Today probably reaffirmed that.”

“Yes and no,” he said. “It was more like a window into everything I gave up, you know? The engineering crew is a team, but it’s not the same. You guys...you depend on each other to survive. And everyone is still nice to me, though I’m not part of the flight. It was nice to experience that again, even if I know I did the right thing by dropping out.”

“We depend on you to survive,” I said. “It was engineering that saved us all today, not the pilots. But I know what you mean.”

The slugs were slowly wandering out of the crate, since I’d left it open. Twist perched on the edge and trilled until Rig reached out to pick her up.

“For what it’s worth,” I said, “I don’t think the rest of the flight sees you as a dropout. Most of *them* dropped out of flight school too. Jorgen and I were the only ones who graduated.”

“How did that feel?” Rig asked.

“Lonely,” I admitted. “Cobb told us on our first day that most of us wouldn’t make it. I felt guilty that I did and the others didn’t.”

“Didn’t stop the rest of them from flying though,” Rig said. “Just me.”

“Do you regret it?” I looked up at him, and was surprised to see him considering the question. He’d said he knew he’d done the right thing, and

it was clear to me that his calling was in engineering.

I also didn't hate that on a normal day he wouldn't be in nearly as much danger as the rest of us.

"No," he said. "Doesn't stop it from hurting sometimes." He looked down at me. "If you had it to do over, would you still become a pilot?"

"Yes," I said. I was surprised at how easily that answer came, even after all we'd been through. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't be able to protect my friends, you know? They'd still be up there flying, but I wouldn't be there."

Rig nodded. "Is that why you became a pilot? To protect people?"

"Ultimately, yeah," I said. "I didn't intend to stay in the DDF forever. I don't like the way the Defiant League acts like war is the most glorious thing ever, the way they make violence seem wonderful, when really it causes so much pain. But I thought if I was a pilot, I'd have the authority and respect to talk about that, you know? That I could stand up for people no one else would defend, and people would have to listen to me."

"People do listen to you," Rig said. "I've always respected that about you. When you talk, everyone listens. Not because you're a pilot. You command respect by being who you are."

My face got warm. "I don't feel like that," I said.

"Yeah," Rig said. "I guess none of us really believe the good things about ourselves, do we?"

"Spensa maybe," I said. But no, that wasn't true. Even Spensa was insecure sometimes. It just made her louder and more threatening.

"She wishes," Rig said. Gill butted up against my elbow until I rested my hand on his head, petting him gently.

"What I wish," I said, "is that I could guarantee these guys a life where the primary goal isn't for us to be able to scare them as many times as possible. I wish there was another way."

"It would be good if we could find something," Rig said. "Because if it takes longer and longer between scares, we're going to need more slugs, or be really limited in how often we can use the hyperdrives. The Superiority has a galaxy worth of planets they could have mined for slugs. They

probably have breeding programs. So far, we have the population of one cave.”

“If we figure out how to use them more efficiently, we might be able to get an edge on the Superiority.” I cringed. Now I was the one talking about the slugs like a resource. “It would improve quality of life for the taynix as well. If they could be *convinced* to hyperjump, even though it’s scary, then we wouldn’t have to rely on their primal impulses.”

“It’s a good goal,” Rig said. “We could design an experiment, see if we can find anything.”

I looked up into his eyes, which were a deep and clear blue, and had some primal impulses of my own. “Fine by me,” I said.

Rig stood off the table and offered me his hand to help me up. When I stood, I didn’t let go.

We were about the same height, so our faces were close without either of us having to lean. I clearly surprised Rig, because he stuttered a bit, but he didn’t move away.

I took that as a good sign. The slug on my shoulder, on the other hand, appeared incapable of reading the room. “Fine!” Gill said.

“Hush,” I told him. And then I leaned forward and brushed my lips against Rig’s.

“Fine!” Gill yelped, and then teleported away. Another escapee I was going to have to track down. *Later.*

I smiled against Rig’s mouth. “Better than fine,” I said.

Rig laughed. “So much better.”

Maybe the slug could read the mood after all.

## Fourteen

When Rig ran an experiment, he did not mess around.

It took us most of the evening to design something up to his standards, even though the experiment itself was only comprised of a couple of boxes set up across the room from each other.

The next morning, we were ready to start gathering data. We'd sorted the slugs, isolating the red and black ones, since we weren't ready to deal with them yet. Our new idea was that in the absence of coordinates, we could teach the slugs to hyperjump to a familiar place on command. It wouldn't immediately help us to reach Cuna, since the slugs had never been to wherever Cuna was, but Rig said that big breakthroughs had to be broken down into smaller steps. Getting the slugs to do *anything* without scaring them would be one important piece. Then, if we could learn how to give them coordinates, we'd have another means to motivate them to go.

If the experiment worked, of course.

"Okay," Rig said. "I think we're ready for phase one."

I pulled Chubs out of the crate. We'd kept all the slugs in the closed box while we set up the experiment, so they couldn't watch us. I wasn't sure how much they would pay attention anyway, but Rig insisted that could invalidate the results.

I opened one of the boxes, showing Chubs a scoop of caviar sitting in a dish on the bottom. "Home," I told him.

"Home!" Chubs trilled.

I let him eat the caviar, then put another small scoop into the dish where he could see it before finally closing the door on the box. Then I took Chubs across the room and put him into another box facing away from the one with the caviar. This box was made out of wood and had a clear front so we could observe him inside and see when he left. Chubs wouldn't be able to reach the caviar unless he decided to hyperjump.

Chubs crawled around the box, his face crinkling at me through the clear plastic.

“He’s not doing anything,” I said.

Rig stood over me with a clipboard, writing notes. I didn’t know what he was writing, because nothing was happening.

“Still nothing,” I said.

“This is how science works,” Rig said. “Nothing, nothing, nothing. Maybe something! Oh, no, that was also nothing.”

“I don’t know how you stand it,” I said.

“Are you kidding? It’s fascinating.”

“Really? *Nothing* is *fascinating*?”

“Sometimes,” Rig said. “Depends on the nothing, I guess. Try giving him the keyword now.”

I pressed my finger to the plastic, getting Chubs’s attention. “Home,” I said to him.

He didn’t move.

“Home,” I said again. “Go home and get the caviar, would you? You’re making me look like an idiot.”

“Home,” Chubs trilled, his voice muted by the plastic. “Home, home.”

“Try looking away,” Rig suggested. “They don’t seem to like to hyperjump while we’re watching.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, turning around. “I’m not watching.”

A moment later, a slug nudged my ankle. There was Chubs, looking up at me expectantly from the floor.

“I think he sees you as the source of caviar, FM,” Rig said.

“FM!” Chubs said.

“Not me,” I said, carrying Chubs over and giving him a second look inside the home box. Then I brought him back to the observation box and shut him behind the transparent door.

“Home,” I said, and I turned around.

Rig studied his clipboard. When I glanced back at the observation box, Chubs was gone. I found him in the “home” location, chowing down on the caviar.



“Hey!” I said. “Good job! Home.”

“Home!” the slug trilled happily.

“Okay,” Rig said. “So he went to find the food because he knew where it was. Now see if you can get him to do it without seeing the food first.”

I waited for Chubs to finish his caviar, and then took him back to the observation box and put him inside. “Home,” I said to him.

“Home,” he replied.

And then he disappeared and reappeared in the “home” box, sniffing around for caviar.

“Hey, it worked,” I said. I pulled out my now almost empty tin of caviar and gave a scoop to Chubs.

“Okay,” Rig said. “Now try it with another slug.”

When I turned around, Drape had already climbed onto Rig’s shoulder, nuzzling his cheek.

“Looks like Drape volunteered to join the experiment.” I scooped Drape up off Rig’s shoulders. Standing this close to him made my skin tingle, and I wasn’t alone; when Rig blushed, even the back of his neck turned red.

Then the door opened abruptly, and we jumped apart.

Jorgen stood in the doorway, holding Gill and looking at us curiously. “Hey,” he said. “Everything okay in here?”

“Fine!” Rig said, too loudly.

“Fine!” Gill said from his perch in the crook of Jorgen’s arm.

“Don’t start that again,” I said to Gill, taking him from Jorgen. “I’m glad you’re here. You’re just in time to participate in our experiment.”

“I don’t think I have time for that,” Jorgen said.

I shrugged. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Jorgen looked at me like I’d lost my mind, but at least he didn’t comment on how close Rig and I had been standing when he’d walked in.

“I was actually coming to tell you two that they’re almost ready to try using the communicator to reach Cuna,” Jorgen said. “They’re going to use the holoprojector to power the communicator, but Cobb still wants all of us present, since we’ve been working with the slugs. Thadwick wants Rig to

consult with him on the communicator, and then FM and I are supposed to report after that.”

“Sure,” Rig said. “FM can show you what we’ve been working on.” He hurried out of the room more quickly than normal. I hoped he was looking to get away from Jorgen and not me.

Probably it wasn’t me.

Jorgen cocked an eyebrow at me. “Working? Is that what you were doing in here?”

“Yes, *actually*,” I said. “We designed an experiment.”

“Is that what they’re calling it now.”

“Shut your mouth,” I told him.

Jorgen smirked at me.

“Would you like me to mock you about Spensa now?” I asked. “Because if that’s fair game, let me just say—”

“Forget I said anything,” Jorgen said quickly. “Show me this experiment.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” I handed Jorgen Rig’s clipboard, though he didn’t look anywhere near as cute carrying it. “You take notes.”

Jorgen squinted at Rig’s notes while I used the last of my caviar running both Drape and Gill through the experiment. Drape didn’t teleport into the box no matter how many times I showed her the caviar, but Gill did so right away, trilling “home” happily at me.

“Huh,” Jorgen said. “Maybe some of them are more motivated by food than others?”

“Probably,” I said. “But even Chubs took a while to follow the command. I don’t know if this will be a reliable way to get them to hyperjump or not, though they do seem to be able to do it over and over again without having to wait for us to scare them.”

Jorgen consulted his watch. “We’re due up at Command,” he said. “I see what you’re doing here FM, but I don’t know that it’s any better than what we have.”

“Not yet,” I said. “Rig says science takes time to yield results.”

“That’s my point,” Jorgen said.

He didn't have to elaborate. We both knew time was one thing we didn't have.

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The command center was crowded with members of the command staff, the engineers, and a few more people from Jeshua Weight's retinue sent by the National Assembly. Jorgen shouldered through to stand behind his mother, and I shadowed him, feeling out of place. I felt better when Rig joined us, coming over from a discussion with several of the other engineers.

"Fine is loaded in the communicator," Rig said. "And we've got the holoprojector hooked up. Cobb has recorded a message and we've set up the data in the communicator to align with the metadata from Cuna's first transmission. It's all very theoretical and I wish we'd had more time to test it, but it should probably work."

"Do you ever get used to it?" I asked. "Always having your projects thrown into service before you feel comfortable with the amount of testing you've done?"

Rig wiped his palms on his jumpsuit. "I definitely haven't gotten there yet."

"All right, quiet now," Cobb said from his place at the front of the room. "We're going to send the message." He nodded to Ziming, who pressed a button on a control panel, and then Cobb spoke into his headset. "This is Admiral Cobb, human from the planet Detritus. Minister Cuna, please confirm receipt."

Ziming pressed another button. "Did it work?" Cobb asked.

"I think so," Ziming said. "It sent, but I don't know if it was—"

"Admiral Cobb, human of Detritus," a voice said over the loudspeaker—the same eerie, even voice we'd heard in the first message. "I confirm receipt. Thank you for your response."

Cobb nodded, and Ziming resumed the transmission. "Minister Cuna. We would like to meet, but are unable to discern your location. Our cytonic is

untrained, and our hyperdrives primitive. Any assistance you can offer to help us reach you would be welcomed. Please advise.”

“I am afraid time is running short,” Cuna responded. “The Superiority has sent forces to bombard my location, and while our minimal artillery has kept them at bay, we expect them to send for reinforcements at any moment.”

“How many ships?” Cobb said over the communicator.

There was a pause. “Twenty fighters. We hear over the datanet that the Superiority forces are spread thin. I fear they will soon mobilize on your planet.”

“They already have,” Cobb said. “We’re holding them off for the moment.”

“Twenty ships,” Jorgen muttered. “We can handle that. If we can get there.”

“I am routing coordinates through my hypercomm,” Cuna said. “Please interface your cytonic with your communicator to receive coordinates.”

“Interface our cytonic?” Jeshua said. “What in the North Star’s light does that mean?”

Most of the room looked at Jorgen, who stuttered. If there was one thing Jorgen hated, it was not having an answer.

“Maybe he needs to interact with the taynix,” I said. “The one we used to send the message.”

“Fine,” Rig said. “He’s in the communicator in Charlie Sector.”

“You shouldn’t have to touch Fine, right?” I asked Jorgen. “You could scare the slugs at a distance, so you should be able to—”

“Hold on,” Jorgen said, closing his eyes. “I’m working on it.”

“You do that,” Cobb said, pulling the microphone closer. “This is Admiral Cobb,” he said. “We’re working on interfacing our cytonic now.”

“Well?” I asked Jorgen quietly.

“I’m trying,” Jorgen said. “Maybe if I—” Jorgen jerked back like he’d been slapped in the face. “I’ve got it. Admiral, I’ve got the coordinates. I know where they are. Stars, that’s painful.” He rubbed his temples. His mother watched him with concern.

“We have your position,” Cobb said. “We’re going to send a flight to defend you. Jorgen, take Skyward Flight and—”

“We should contact the National Assembly,” Jeshua said. “Let them make a decision before we send away one of our cytonics. We don’t know if they’ll be able to return.”

Cobb looked at Jorgen.

“That’s true, sir,” Jorgen said. “I’m not sure I can find Detritus again on my own. The slugs might be able to return instinctively from that far of a distance, but I can’t be sure. But these aliens, they understand the hyperdrives better than we do. They might be able to teach us how.”

Cobb turned to Jeshua. “You want to be able to communicate with our enemies. This is the only alien force that has ever offered to talk with us. We have to take this chance.”

“I agree with you,” Jeshua said. “But it’s up to the National Assembly to decide—”

“Sir,” Jorgen said. “The coordinates are fading. It’s slow, so we have a little bit of time, but it’s like it was with Spensa. I don’t know how to hang on to it.”

“Take your flight,” Cobb said to Jorgen. “Go now.”

Jeshua scowled at him.

Jorgen hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said, and I followed Jorgen out of the command center. Together we ran for the landing bay.

## Fifteen

The rest of our flight met us at our ships. T-Stall was still munching on a handful of fried algae strips from the mess hall, and Catnip was zipping up his jumpsuit, but Kimmalyn and Sadie were already climbing into their cockpits.

“What’s happening?” Arturo asked, meeting us by Jorgen’s ship. “It’s just us this time?”

“We’re going to rescue a defecting Superiority minister,” Jorgen said. “Just our flight, but we need to hurry. Minister Cuna is already under attack. I have coordinates to hyperjump there, but we’re still figuring out how we’re going to get back.”

Arturo looked alarmed at that news. “Those are our orders?”

“Those are our orders,” Jorgen said. “Let’s get everyone in the air.”

Arturo nodded and headed for his ship, yelling at Nedd on the way to do the same.

Rig ran up with a box full of slugs, which he thrust into my arms. Gill was in there along with Happy, Chubs, Drape, and Twist. “Cobb wants us to keep the holoprojector attached to the communicator,” he said. “That way we’ll be able to communicate with you when you get there, because we’ll have one and Cuna has one.”

“You might not be able to scare Fine again,” I said. “You’ll have to try another purple slug. Though we received more than one communication from Cuna out of the same one, so maybe the connection lasts for a while after it’s established?”

“I’ll check on that as soon as you leave.” Rig bit his lip, looking like he wanted to say something but thought better of it.

“I’ll help you load the slugs into Jorgen’s ship,” I said, looking down at the slugs. There was another purple slug in there and I thought it had gotten mixed in, but when we reached Jorgen’s cockpit Rig put him in the metal

box beneath the dash with the others. “I think you should take a communication slug with you,” he said. “I don’t know for sure how many taynix Cuna will have. Technically, Jorgen can communicate cytonically without a slug at all, but I think you should have every resource we can spare with you in case—” His voice broke, and he took a deep breath.

I got it. I was going and he was staying, and he was scared. Probably for all of us, but I liked to think that he was sparing a little extra for me.

“I’ll come back,” I said. “Perfect record of not dying, remember?”

“Yeah,” Rig said. “I remember.”

I wanted to take his hand, but Jorgen was already climbing into his cockpit.

Time to go.

“We haven’t had time to set the ships up with interlocking pieces,” Rig said to Jorgen, “so you’re going to have to do it the way you did last time, all touching wings.”

“Got it,” Jorgen said. “We’ll make it work. FM, let’s go.”

Rig reached out and squeezed me on the arm, and then hurried away. I ran for my regular Poco and climbed in, immediately engaging my acclivity ring and boosting away. As my ship rose toward the ceiling of platforms between the sections of crackling blue energy holding the shield together at the seams, I looked back and saw Rig watching us go.

*I’ll be back*, I thought at him. Saying it wouldn’t make it more or less true though. It wasn’t a promise any of us could make.

Maybe I shouldn’t have started anything between us, put him in a position to hurt even more if the worst happened. Or maybe I was making too much of it. Maybe none of us mattered, not really. What did it change when any of us were gone? The DDF still churned out more cadets. If they ran out, they’d lower the age to take the pilot’s test and bring them in younger and younger. We’d keep sending groups on missions like this, never knowing if they’d come back, because our survival as a group mattered more than the individuals. I didn’t disagree with that; I saw the logic to it.

But I still wondered: if we didn't matter as individuals, then what were we saving the group *for*?

I joined the rest of the flight less than half a kilometer from the platform. Through a gap between platforms I could see the crackling net of the shield. As frightened as I'd been of the stars—feeling like I could fall off the face of the world—I missed them now that they were gone.

I supposed I'd be seeing them again soon enough.

"Skyward Flight," Jorgen said, "move in together. All ships need to be touching, or some of you will be left behind."

I maneuvered my ship between Sadie's and Kimmalyn's with a gentle touch. The metal of our wings rubbed against each other, and I could see Sadie looking over at me through her canopy. I tried to give her a reassuring smile. I remembered what Rig said: *You seem like you always have it together.*

I *wanted* to seem that way, I realized. Spensa lost her temper, Jorgen got frustrated, Rig could talk about fear like it was his best friend.

And me?

There was safety in being the one everyone else looked to. I felt everything, but I didn't want anyone to know it.

"All right," Jorgen said. "That looks good. Initiating hyperdrive."

I closed my eyes. We were about to hyperjump many, many times farther than we ever had. I wondered if it would take longer. I wondered if—

"Stars!" T-Stall said over the radio. "Are you guys seeing this?"

"Yes," Jorgen said. "I think—I think that's our destination."

I opened my eyes and stared out through the glass of my canopy at the expanse of black in front of me. The light of the nearest star was behind us, illuminating an object in the distance—a large rock that was dominated by dozens of white tentacles protruding from it like petals on some wildflower.

Or, well, it was impossible to tell by sight *how* large or distant it was. I'd never seen anything I could compare this thing to. I widened the scope of my proximity monitors, trying to get a sense of it.

"We're a hundred and fifty klicks out," Arturo said, beating me to it. "That *thing*. *That's* where we're going?"



“I’m getting a communication,” Jorgen said. “Hang on.”

We hung on. Our ships had drifted a little since we’d jumped, so we were no longer bumping into each other, but none of us had engaged our boosters to move far.

My radio made a little flickering noise, and I reached out to adjust the dial. This wasn’t the time for the thing to fritz out.

And then Cuna’s smooth, alien voice came over the radio. “Skyward Flight,” the alien said. “Thank you for coming to our aid. Your leader has given me permission to address you. As you can see, my crew and I are stranded on the old Superiority outpost of Sunreach—an abandoned research facility built here to study this rare species of mammoth starpod. You’ll want to avoid it. It’s nearing its molting cycle, which makes it especially hungry.”

“It’s *hungry*?” Catnip said. “Jerkface, what does she mean it’s *hungry*?”

“I understand you humans have not often encountered other species,” Cuna’s voice continued. “My species is referred to as *they*, because we do not conform to human genders. Diones are—”

“Jorgen?” Nedd said. “What is the alien talking about?”

“They’re saying don’t call them ‘she,’ ” I said. “But maybe we could deal with the formal introductions when we get there?”

“Right,” Jorgen said. “Um, thank you for the...etiquette lesson. My team will do our best to learn what language you prefer. For now, can you tell us how to reach you? Are you saying that giant star...flower...*thing* is going to eat us?”

“Yes, the mammoth starpod. It generally prefers minerals and other space matter, but the feeler tubes on its limbs can’t distinguish the metal in your ships from more nutritious varieties, so you might get past its mandibles before it realizes it has captured you in error. I recommend avoiding the limbs entirely by flying around the back side of the...Oh, *that’s* unfortunate.”

Beyond the mammoth starpod, several objects soared toward us. Ships, from the look of them on the proximity monitor, probably the ones waiting

for backup from the Superiority. Except they must have noticed us, because they weren't waiting anymore.

"Please," Cuna said. "*Hurry*."

"Skyward Flight," Jorgen said. "We're going to fly around to the...side of this rock that doesn't want to eat us. Anyone *not* clear on which side that is?"

"The one without the pretty space monster," Kimmalyn said. "Got it."

"Right," Jorgen said. "Avoid the enemy ships, but if one shoots at you, shoot it back."

"Always solid advice," I said. "Formation?"

"Double V," Jorgen said. "Orient so the giant space monster is on top of the...giant space rock."

Without a planet nearby to orient which way was down, I supposed it made sense to agree on it in advance.

"Why on the top?" Nedd asked. "Couldn't the tentacled monster of death be on the bottom?"

"Because flowers grow *up*," Sadie said. "Even giant death flowers. Everyone knows that."

"She's got you there, Nedder," Arturo said.

"Less chatter," Jorgen said. "Let's keep an eye on what we're flying into."

We quieted down and fanned out, rotating so that the starpod bloomed upward into the dark sky, then accelerated toward Sunreach in wingmate pairs, Arturo and Nedd taking point on one side with Sadie and me on the other. With my proximity monitor still zoomed out, I could see ten enemy ships closing in on a location near the center of the underside of the rock. Another ten ships were closing in on us now. They outnumbered us, but we were used to it.

"FM and Sentry," Jorgen said, "draw off as many as you can. T-Stall and Catnip, back them up. The rest of us will try to punch through to the other group of ships. Divide and conquer."

Dividing the team into two groups also weakened us, but it seemed like a good choice, all things considered. If we spent too much time on the

intercepting force, the remaining ships had more time to kill or capture Cuna.

“Understood,” I said, and Sadie and I sped toward the incoming ships. When we drew closer, we pivoted our boosters to slow down to dogfighting speeds. Sadie would follow my lead, which meant the specific shape of this maneuver was up to me. The smarter thing for these ships to do would be to refuse the bait and keep a perimeter to prevent us from getting close to the base where Cuna and their team were sheltered. I had to make it look like I was trying to punch past the ships instead of trying to distract them from their mission, and hope they saw me as enough of a threat that it worked.

“Cover me,” I said to Sadie.

“I’ve got you,” Sadie replied.

I kicked into a complicated sequence of evasive maneuvers, the kind that would have made Rig turn green. I slipped past the enemy ships through a shower of destructor fire. Several pivoted, their lines of red fire following me. I took a hit, but it glanced off my shield. I sped toward Cuna’s location, gathering tails as I went.

“Nice going, FM,” Jorgen said.

“We’ve got you covered,” Catnip added.

Now it was time to fake panic. I let my evasive maneuvers grow wider and sloppier, not so much that I gave the enemy too wide of a target, but enough that they might interpret it as me losing control. Then I reversed my boosters, feeling the sharp drag as the g-forces overwhelmed the GravCaps. I switched direction, darting back toward the enemy ships in a way that was impossible to do in atmosphere but worked beautifully in a vacuum. I roped one with my light-lance and used my own momentum to execute a turn, then flew off to the side, letting the ship go once I was past.

It worked. Half of the ships followed me as I shot off toward the side. T-Stall and Catnip joined Sadie in firing on the ships from behind, adding to the adrenaline of the chase. The enemy ships raced after me, destructor fire surrounding me, weakening my shield. I sped up—I wouldn’t be able to outrun them, but they’d become less accurate at high speeds, and out here we had all the space in the world.

“Well done,” Jorgen said. “Moving in toward the base now. Amphi and Nedder, take point. Quirk and I will cover you.”

“They’re on to us,” T-Stall said. “Peeling away and coming your direction, Jerkface.”

It was true. Two of the ships were still hot on my tail, but the other three were making a wide loop and heading back to chase down the rest of the flight.

“Sentry and I can handle this if you want to follow,” I said to T-Stall and Catnip. They both readily agreed, circling around to go after the returning ships.

I continued my evasive maneuvers, trying to hold the interest of my two tails. I couldn’t keep it up forever though.

“Ready to take care of these guys?” I asked Sadie.

“Ready and willing,” Sadie replied.

“You take the one on my left wing,” I said. “I’ll take the one on the right.”

“You got it,” Sadie said, and I abruptly cut speed, slowing myself with a reverse of my boosters. The enemy ships shot past me and I engaged my IMP, dropping their shields.

Both Sadie and I opened fire, ripping the enemy ships apart against the dark sky.

“Good work,” I said to Sadie. “Let’s help the others.” We paused while I reignited my shield and then we reversed course, now far enough out that I couldn’t get a visual of the others against the dark expanse. I listened as the others exchanged orders over the radio, engaging with the enemy ships.

“Jerkface, they’re headed for you.”

“I’ve got them. Cover me.”

“Jerkface, I’ve got a clear shot. Can you bring down their shields?”

“On it.”

Sadie and I accelerated as I found the others on my monitor. It was scudding hard to take down a Krell fighter without bringing down their shields first, but these ships were too good—all enemy aces, not the less-skilled drone pilots we’d been fighting. Our team needed backup.

“Jerkface, you’ve got three ships on your tail,” Arturo said. “Don’t bring down your shields.”

“I see them,” Jorgen said. “I’ll jump out right after. Engaging IMP.”

Sadie and I soared closer, and I finally spotted Jorgen’s ship against the backdrop of space just as his shield went down.

Half a second later, he disappeared. I immediately zoomed out my proximity monitors, searching for his ship.

Jorgen reappeared on the other side of the rock, up near the mammoth starpod and its dangerous tentacles.

“Jerkface, what are you doing?” I said over the radio.

“I overshot,” Jorgen said. “I think the slug misunderstood me.”

“Get out of there!” I said.

“I’m on it,” he said. “I’m going to go evasive and try to fly out. If that fails, I’ll engage the hyperdrive again.”

On the monitor, the arms of the starpod moved slowly, like they were swaying in a breeze.

“Um, guys?” Nedd said. “What is the enemy doing?”

I watched on my monitors as several of the ships near Cuna’s base—and all of the ones we’d been dogfighting—sped out around the edge of the rock and upward toward the tentacles of the starpod.

They knew more about this creature than we did. If they thought they could survive flying through the tentacles, they probably could.

But Jorgen couldn’t take all those ships. Not by himself.

“Humans,” Cuna said over the radio. “Our analysis of the enemy flight patterns suggests that their primary focus is now to kill your cytonic.”

“You don’t say,” Nedd said.

“Jerkface,” Arturo said, “they’re coming for you. Get out of there.”

“Engaging hyperdrive,” Jorgen said.

“We’re on our way,” I said, accelerating to follow the other ships up and over the rock.

Scud, the starpod was *enormous*. This rock was far smaller than a planet, much closer to the size of one of the larger platforms around Detritus. But the arms of the starpod reached many times farther than the diameter of the

rock, each tentacle many wingspans wide and several kilometers long. They were whitish in color, with a smaller purplish stalk growing up the middle of each arm giving the illusion of a purple racing stripe. If the starpod was using those feelers to catch debris out of the space around it, it could almost certainly grab and hold a starship. As if attracted to my motion, one of the arms began to lean slowly in my direction, and I rolled my ship out of the way to avoid it.

Up ahead I could see Jorgen's ship near the center of the creature. The enemy ships raced toward him, opening fire, as the tentacles of the starpod slowly swayed in their direction.

"Engaging hyperdrive," Jorgen said. His ship blinked out—

And back again, this time *closer* to the body of the starpod.

"Scud, the slugs aren't listening to me," Jorgen said. "I think they're trying to get into a smaller space."

I steered my ship up to get a better view.

And stared into the scudding maw of the creature. Rows and rows of long ivory protrusions jutted from its center like teeth, but these were clearly flexible, waving about like the much-longer tentacles.

Tongues. This creature had a thousand tongues arranged in circles around its pink, cavernous mouth. And at this moment, all of them were reaching for Jorgen's ship. The enemy ships continued to move toward him and I followed, Sadie at my wing. Jorgen pulled up, clearing the tongues, then evaded a tentacle that undulated down, looping toward him. The enemy reached him, destructor fire raining everywhere.

"Get out of there!" I said to Jorgen.

"Engaging—" Jorgen said.

His shield cracked.

"Hyper—"

His ship jerked to the side, like he was trying to avoid the fire for one more moment to give himself enough time to frighten one of the slugs. One final movement, and then his shield broke.

"Scud—" Jorgen said over the radio.

And then his ship ripped apart, torn to bits by enemy fire, the pieces floating backward as the creature licked toward them eagerly with its tongues.

## Sixteen

*No.*

I pulled my ship up, then ducked down again to avoid a tentacle that swung toward me and the enemy ships with a broad stroke. The enemy avoided it as well, but I wished a fiery death upon every one of them.

Jorgen had a ship full of hyperdrives. He should have been able to get out when his shield dropped. But if he did, the slugs would have teleported him somewhere out into space. If Jorgen wasn't dead yet of depressurization, he would soon asphyxiate.

*No.*

"FM? Sentry?" Arturo said over the radio. "What's going on up there?"

"Um," Sadie said. "Um, Jerkface—"

I wasn't going to make her explain this. "Jerkface is down," I said.

"FM?" Arturo said. "Say again?"

"Jerkface is down," I repeated. I didn't know how I could sound so dispassionate. My voice was foreign to my own ears. "His ship was destroyed. Salvage irretrievable."

Silence over the radio.

Finally, Kimmalyne was the one who spoke. "He got out, right? He had all those slugs. He must have gotten out."

"FM?" Arturo asked.

"I don't know," I said honestly. I didn't explain what the likely outcome was if he had. My friends already knew.

"All right," Arturo said. "Mourn later. We have a mission."

"Amphi—" Nedd started.

"Mourn *later*," Arturo said firmly. He was first assistant, now our flightleader. "Flight, regroup. We're going to make a run for the base, try to take out the remaining ships on the way."

"Humans?" Cuna said. "I have lost contact with your commander."



“This is Amphisbaena,” Arturo said. “I’m in command now.” His voice was tight, clipped. He was clearly struggling to follow his own orders, and I didn’t blame him. “We’re still coming to get you and your people out of there.”

“That would be appreciated,” Cuna said. “The ships are firing on our location, and our shield has been breached.”

Sadie wove among the tentacles of the starpod, headed for the edge of the creature where we could dive to the underside of the rock again. The enemy ships followed, and Sadie and I performed a double scissor, avoiding their fire. As one of the ships tried to chase us, a starpod arm slapped it from beneath. The ship stuck to the stalks and the tentacle carried it away down toward its mouth.

If ships weren’t nutritious, the creature clearly hadn’t figured that out yet.

“Status, FM?” Arturo asked.

“We’re on our way, Amphi,” I said. “Don’t wait for us.”

“Copy. All pilots, move toward Cuna and destroy the enemy ships.”

I rolled away from another tentacle as it arced toward me, shooting over the edge of the creature and plummeting down the side of the rock. Sadie followed right behind me, finally out of the starpod’s reach. My flightmates coordinated with each other over the radio as they engaged the enemy. I knew we had to join them—we were still outnumbered, and the more of us got involved in the fight, the greater chances we’d get out alive.

Though I wasn’t sure what the point was. We’d lost Jorgen, our only cytonic. Without him, what were the rest of us going to do? We’d be as stranded here as Cuna, waiting for the Superiority to send reinforcements to finish us. Cuna probably had a slug and a projector for their communicator, but without a cytonic we couldn’t use those to get home.

We’d lost. We’d gambled and we’d lost.

And so—despite my absolute agreement with Arturo that the time to mourn would come later—I felt tears forming in my eyes. Hot streams of them ran along my cheeks, and I pushed my ship faster, almost welcoming the g-forces as they overcame the GravCaps.

We were approaching our flight now, and as we did a shape popped into existence on my dashboard, causing me to jump.

Gill sat there, nuzzling my arm.

Had he tried to save Jorgen? If his body was lost in space somewhere, we wouldn't be able to bring him home.

Gill slipped off the dashboard and onto my lap, quivering up against me like he wanted to comfort me. I didn't blame the slugs for what happened to Jorgen. I was glad Gill had gotten out, and hoped the others had as well. Maybe Jorgen had opened the box at the last moment, realizing he wasn't going to make it out, giving the slugs the chance to escape. The communications slug couldn't hyperjump, so it had likely been consumed by the starpod.

Without cytonic abilities or a holoprojector, I couldn't make Gill hyperjump, so his presence wasn't useful to me. We were still in far too desperate a situation for me to feel relieved.

I couldn't help but be glad that he was here though. I ran one hand up his back as I engaged my destructors with the other, distracting a ship that was tailing Kimmalyne. As if he could sense my distress, Gill cuddled closer, tightening around my waist like a leathery belt.

And then everything changed. My ship disappeared, my monitors, the whole of space. I was plunged into darkness.

And landed with a thud onto a cold concrete floor.

"Ouch!" I shouted, cradling my shoulder where I'd landed. Gill dropped off my waist, rolling over on the floor. I couldn't see anything, but I was definitely not in outer space anymore. Or in my ship, as I lay on a slab of cracked concrete. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see a shadow up ahead, and I crawled toward it with one arm out.

My hand met wood. A doorframe, I realized, and there was the door, which moved on squeaky hinges. Gill had hyperjumped and taken me with him, though I didn't know where or why. Technically we could be anywhere in the universe now, but the taynix didn't tend to go far without specific instructions.

I stood, pushed the door the rest of the way open, and stepped into a shadowy corridor. What little light there was came from a thin band of tube lighting that ran along the ceiling, and I followed it, moving up this corridor and then down another. The air was warm, I realized. There was atmosphere for me to breathe and gravity to hold me down and heat to keep me from freezing to death. Wherever Gill had brought me, it appeared to be somewhere relatively safe.

And then I felt the explosion. It reverberated through the building, the stone trembling beneath my feet. This might be the source of the cracks, I realized. This building was under attack.

I had begun to suspect where I was, and so I was only slightly astounded when I reached the end of the corridor and stumbled into a room filled with creatures unlike any I'd ever seen.

A tall, slender humanoid with bright blue skin stood at a control panel of some sort, flanked by two similar creatures, though one of them had skin that was entirely red. They had ridges over their eyes that were similar to Alanik's, though without the crystalline growths, and cheekbones too prominent to be human.

Next to the slender blue alien was Jorgen, looking out the glass window at the stars.

"Jorgen!" I said, and launched myself across the room to throw my arms around him. I overshot a bit, running into him and knocking him off his feet and into the console. I ended up mostly hugging his shoulder as I tried to keep from falling over.

Not my most graceful move, but given that Jorgen was alive and not currently suffocating in the vacuum, I could accept it.

"FM," he said, "what are you—"

Sadie's voice cut him off, crackling over the radio. "—her ship was empty, Amphi. I got a good look before it crashed. She wasn't there."

"Where in the stars did she go then?" Arturo answered. "She can't have just *disappeared*."

"She's here," Jorgen said, pushing a button on the radio. "She's attached herself to my arm in a very awkward fashion, but FM is here and very much

alive.”

I let go, taking a step back.

“How did you get here?” Jorgen asked me.

“Gill,” I said. I left him in the corridor, I realized, and he was just now catching up, lying on the floor by the doorway. I ran over and scooped him up, giving him a hug for good measure. He’d teleported me out of my ship in the middle of a fight, and it had apparently crashed into the rock, but he’d clearly been trying to help.

“Glad to hear it,” Arturo said over the radio. “Sentry, help Quirk. She’s got three tails. Scud, they’re firing on you again—”

The radio cut off as another explosion rocked the bunker where we stood.

The blue alien closed their eyes, then turned to Jorgen. They were wearing one of those translator pins, like the one we used with Alanik. “Our defenses won’t last much longer,” they said. I recognized their voice from the transmission. This must be Cuna. “They are targeting our life support generators. When those fail, so will the artificial gravity, the air field, and the heat producers. If we don’t go now, we may be out of time.”

Jorgen glanced over at me.

And all at once, I realized what Cuna meant.

“You’re not thinking of *leaving* them here,” I said. “Our flight. Our *friends*. We can’t go without them.”

“Cuna has the coordinates from their communicator,” Jorgen said quietly. “We have the ability to get home with Cuna and their staff. Those were our orders, FM.”

He didn’t sound happy about it. *Of course* he wasn’t happy about it. Jorgen didn’t want to leave our flight here any more than I did. “Can we get out of here?” I asked. “Do we have a slug that hasn’t been scared?”

“We have Gill and Chubs,” Jorgen said, gesturing, and I found Chubs sitting in the corner in a strange disk-shaped chair. “I don’t think I used either of them when I hyperjumped. I definitely didn’t use both. We should be able to use them to jump to the Detritus coordinates. It’ll take us to the location of our communicator on Platform Prime.”

I knew the right answer. The needs of the group outweighed the needs of the individuals. We were pilots. We signed up to protect the lives of the citizens on Detritus. We were willing to make this sacrifice, every one of us.

I would have been willing to die to save the lives of my friends, no question. But could we really just leave, sacrificing their lives for ours?

Rescuing Cuna was the mission. That was exactly what we were expected to do.

“Nedder, help Sentry,” Arturo said. “She’s overwhelmed. Quirk, do you have a line on that ship on my tail?”

Cuna slipped their thin fingers up onto the dash and pushed a button. The radio went quiet.

They were turning off the voices, trying to make this decision easier. It could have been a kindness, but it felt like a slap in the face.

Another explosion rocked the base, and the lights flickered out.

“We can’t leave them here,” I said. Stars, this was why I never wanted to be in command. I didn’t have the stomach for it.

“We’ll come back,” Jorgen said. “I’ll jump Cuna and their people out and I’ll *come back*—”

“You think they’re going to let you?” I asked. “You think they’re going to let their *only useful cytonic* come jumping back to probably *die* here? Will you really *do* that?”

Jorgen looked at me, and I could see the weight of the decision in his eyes. This wasn’t his fault. None of it was. We were all of us in a terrible position.

But it was our team that was going to pay the price.

“Fine,” I said. “I know you’re only doing what has to be done.”

“Fine!” Gill said in my arms.

“Not now,” I said to him. He’d saved my life bringing me here. I should have been grateful. But what I wanted was to be out there in my ship, fighting alongside my friends.

Gill must have sensed my despair, because he disappeared.

Jorgen closed his eyes, and I could see the grief on his face.

“All right,” he said to Cuna. “Prepare your people to go.”

Cuna put out a call for the rest of their team to converge on the control room, then Jorgen took control of the radio. “Flight,” he said. “Abandon the mission.”

“Say again, Jerkface?” Arturo said. “Abandon—”

“We are taking Cuna to safety,” Jorgen said. “All units pull back in a full retreat, delta formation. Go on full burn on a heading Arturo chooses, and we’ll try to come back for you once the minister is safe.”

He glanced at me. “I’ll come back for them,” he said. “I’ll bring a ship. I’ll get the coordinates again, fly back here, and *bring them home*—”

He was pleading with me to tell him I believed this was possible. Maybe it was. Maybe he was right.

But I worried that the politicians would overrule Cobb, if he was inclined to allow it. No way were six pilots worth risking our only cytonic. I didn’t even blame them, really. I understood the math.

But I hated it all.

“Fine!” Gill’s voice said. I turned around to find Gill in the doorway with Fine, the communications slug that had been in the communicator at Detritus.

Right there on the floor.

“What in the stars—” Jorgen said.

“Fine!” Gill said, sliding toward me and trilling louder, like maybe I hadn’t heard him. “Fine!”

He’d gone to retrieve Fine, all the way from Detritus. He’d done it because he thought that’s what I wanted. No one had to scare him into it. He’d done it for the same reason he’d taken me out of my ship. Because I was upset, and Gill was trying to help.

Help.

I grabbed Jorgen by the arm. “Send him an image of Sadie,” I said.

“What?” Jorgen asked.

“With your *mind*,” I said. “Send Gill an image of Sadie, like you do with the eyes, and with the locations you want them to travel.”

“Why would I—”

“Now!” I said, squeezing his arm tight enough that he winced. Bullying the flightleader wasn’t my finest moment, but we didn’t have the time for me to explain.

“Fine,” Jorgen said.

“Fine!” Gill replied.

“No, Sadie,” I said. “Go get *Sadie*.”

Jorgen closed his eyes.

Gill disappeared.

“FM,” Jorgen said. “We can’t send the slugs off. We need them to—”

Another blow rocked the base, and I felt the atmospheric production system go offline. My ears popped as the room began to depressurize. Two more of the strange aliens appeared in the doorway, stepping over Fine and moving into the room.

“We’re all here,” Cuna said. “It’s time.”

I shook my head. “Wait. Give Gill a moment.”

“FM—” Jorgen started.

And then Sadie appeared. She materialized a few feet off the floor and landed with a thump, her knees bending, arms stretched out to keep from falling over. Belatedly, she screamed.

And I gave my second awkward hug, throwing my arms around her and nearly bowling her over. “Jorgen!” I said. “Tell Gill to get the others. Send the images to Chubs too. We can pull them out. They *want* to help.” I scooped Gill up off the floor. “I’m going to give you a whole *case* of caviar when we get back,” I said. “Go *get our friends*.”

Jorgen blinked at me, but he must have done as I said, because both slugs disappeared.

“Commander,” Cuna said. “With all due respect, we need to *go*—”

Another blast made the floor shake, and Sadie and I clung to each other to stay upright.

“What’s happening?” she asked me.

“I’ll explain later,” I said.

This most recent blast must have hit the system that created the false gravity, because suddenly my feet were no longer stuck to the floor. Arturo

appeared beside me, and then Kimmalyn. Chubs and Gill came with them, and then Twist appeared with T-Stall, and Drape with Catnip. Happy blinked in a moment later and Nedd appeared up by the ceiling, floating. The rest of our flight looked at each other in confusion.

“That’s everyone,” Jorgen said. “Huddle together!”

Another blast from the ships cracked the window, which fractured in a spiral pattern. T-Stall reached up and grabbed Nedd by the wrist, pulling him down with the rest of us, and we held on to each other. Cuna and their staff crowded in as well, linking hands. I let Sadie hold onto my waist and grabbed Gill in one hand and Chubs in the other and tossed them to Kimmalyn, who caught them while I gathered the rest of the slugs in my arms.

“Don’t scare them,” I said to Jorgen.

“FM,” he said, clearly exasperated. “What in the—”

“Home!” I shouted. “Home! Take us *home*.”

“Home!” Chubs and Gill trilled together.

Glass rained down over us as the ships above opened fire.

And then the entire world disappeared.



# Epilogue

We appeared in the room where the slugs were housed on Platform Prime, all bunched together in a group and about four feet off the ground. We landed in a tangle of limbs both alien and human, with a chorus of groans and ouches and Nedd yelling, “Get the scud off my neck!” My knees were bruised and my neck tweaked, adrenaline still pumping so hard you’d think I’d faced a firing squad.

But I laughed. I laughed because we were somehow, all of us, *alive*.

As my flightmates on the edges extracted themselves and began helping the aliens to their feet, I sat in the center of the floor laughing my head off, until Gill came and tucked himself up under my arm. “Home?” he said uncertainly.

“Home,” I said. “Home, home, *home*.” And I hugged the slug tight to my chest.

“Um, FM?” Jorgen said. “I don’t think you’re supposed to squeeze them like that.”

“Shut up, Jorgen,” I said. And then, right in the middle of laughing, I also burst into tears.

That was what I looked like when the door to the room flew open and Rig stood there, gaping at all of us, Cobb right behind him looking like he’d seen a ghost.

Rig watched me sitting there, laughing and crying, and came over to kneel next to me. He looked up at Jorgen. “You broke FM?” he asked.

“Apparently,” Jorgen said.

Cobb shook his head. “I thought Spensa was the only one who pulled scudding stupid stunts like that. You realize you left your scudding *starfighters* behind, don’t you? I can’t turn my back on any of you for a moment.”

I wiped away my tears and stood. The ships were a loss, no question, but I could tell from the way he looked at us that this wasn't Cobb's primary concern. He'd been as worried for our team as I was. "Apparently not, sir," I said.

Cobb looked up at the aliens then, cleared his throat, and held out his hand.

"Minister Cuna, I presume?" he said. "I'm Admiral Cobb. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Cuna stood to their full height, which was taller than Cobb, and bared their teeth at him. Cobb looked worried for a moment.

"It is a pleasure," Cuna said. "Thank you for sending your team to our aid. We look forward to repaying your trouble."

Out in the hallway, Jorgen's mother cleared her throat. Cobb's face darkened briefly, and then he stepped to the side. "Minister Cuna," he said. "May I introduce Jeshua Weight, our emissary from the National Assembly. She's eager to speak with you."

I exchanged a look with Jorgen. His mother had barged in and scared away our last diplomatic opportunity. I didn't know where Alanik had gone, but I doubted very much that she was ever coming back.

"Of course," Cuna said, gliding elegantly out of the room, their teeth still bared, their retinue following after them.

Scud, was that supposed to be a *smile*?

"The rest of you," Cobb said, "come up to the command center for debriefing."

"Sir," I said. "I'd like to get the slugs settled, if you don't mind."

"Fine," Cobb said.

"Fine!" several of the slugs replied.

"Stars, those things are annoying," Cobb said, and he led the rest of the team up the hallway.

Only Rig stayed behind.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said back. "Were you listening over the hypercomm to all of that?"

“Some,” Rig said. “It sounded pretty dire.”

“It was,” I said. “I thought Jorgen had been eaten by a giant space monster, but the slugs jumped him out.”

Rig gaped at me, and I felt a bit of hysterical laughter welling up again. “A *space monster*?”

“Mammoth starpod, specifically. You should have seen it. It was bigger than Platform Prime. And then Gill took me to find Jorgen, and for a while we thought we were going to have to leave the rest of the team there to die.”

“Gill took you,” Rig said. “Of his own accord.”

“Kind of,” I said. “He thought I wanted him to. These things are a lot smarter than we assumed.” I found Gill wrapped around the leg of the table and scooped him up, running my fingers through the fringe on his back. “We need to figure out how to *communicate* with them. Once they know us and care about us, they want to help us out. We don’t have to scare them. We can...*ask* them.”

“Like a partnership,” Rig said.

“Like a partnership.” I set Gill down on the table and looked up at him.

Rig stood awkwardly with his arms crossed like he didn’t know what to do with them.

Scud, that boy was cute. “I’m sorry to have worried you,” I said.

“Yeah, well,” he said, scuffing his toe on the floor. “I should have known you wouldn’t break your perfect record.”

“Not if I can help it,” I said.

I didn’t know if I’d always be able to help it, not really. There was always the chance that I’d go out on a mission and never return, like Lizard, like Hurl and Bim before her. Like so many others we’d lost. We weren’t done. The hyperdrives gave us hope for the future, but things were only going to get more dangerous from here, not less.

Maybe it would have been safer to protect myself. Maybe it would have been kinder to Rig not to let either of us get attached.

But I reached out a hand, and Rig took it. His fingers laced through mine.

It wasn’t enough to survive for survival’s sake. I wanted to *live*. I leaned in and kissed him, slowly and tenderly, like we had all the time in the

world. And by the stars, I hoped we did.

“Help it!” Gill said, and I turned around to see all of the slugs we’d returned with gathered around a stack of goods that must have been brought in from requisitions in our absence. Several boxes of algae strips, some vacuum-packed mushrooms.

And an entire tower of jars of caviar.

“All right,” I said. “You guys have earned it.”

I cracked several jars open and let them eat their fill.

**SKYWARD FLIGHT'S  
STORY CONTINUES IN**

# **REDAWN**

**On sale 10/26/21**



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Peter

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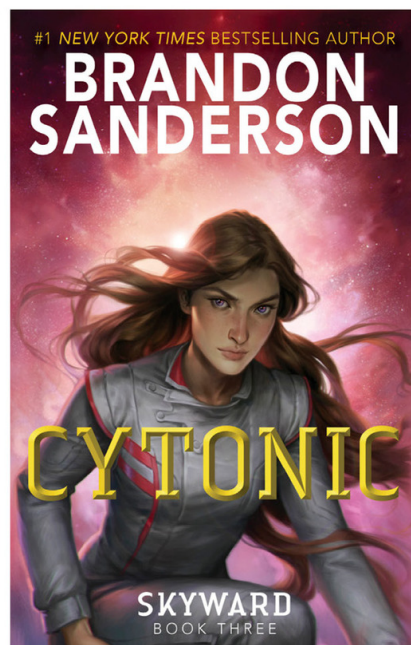
Janci Patterson writes in a variety of genres, so whatever you're looking for, she's probably got something you'll like. Her first book, *Chasing the Skip*, was published by Henry Holt in 2012. After publishing several contemporary YA novels and the YA paranormal A Thousand Faces trilogy, Janci discovered a love of collaboration and has written books with Megan Walker, Lauren Janes, James Goldberg, and Brandon Sanderson.

Janci lives in Utah with her mini-painting husband, Drew Olds, and their two awesome kids. She has an MA in creative writing from BYU. When she's not writing, Janci enjoys turn-based RPGs, miniatures board games, barbie repaints, and playing with her border collie.

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**BRANDON  
SANDERSON**  
AND JANCI PATTERSON

# REDAWN

SKYWARD FLIGHT: NOVELLA TWO

DELACORTE PRESS

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Books by Brandon Sanderson](#)

[Books by Janci Patterson](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*About the Authors\*](#)

For Kenton Olds,  
who makes me laugh every day

—JP

# One

I stood at the edge of a balcony on one of the branches of the Stadium tree, watching the games play out in the enormous hollow below. This particular tree had been chosen for its shape—branches reaching out horizontally and then curving up and inward like the sides of a massive vase, large enough that the spectators on the far side appeared to be nothing more than rows of rippling dots. Twelve ships soared across the widest part of the hollow, six painted Independence blue and the remaining in Unity yellow.

Dim light filtered through the red and purple miasma in the sky above the canopy, and enormous spotlights hung on cables from the branches above, illuminating the ships jetting about. Above the spotlights, just beneath the huge sweeping branches, a hologram enlarged the skirmish, and I watched as one of the Independence ships broke away from the pack, dodging a barrage of laser fire, and slipped through the hoop marking the goal.

Cheers rang through the stadium, and the mining corps that sponsored this match lit off a round of fireworks in Independence blue. With three goals so far, the Independence team was winning.

At least we were winning at *something*.

Beside me, Rinakin—my advisor in the cytonic training program—half-heartedly waved an Independence pennant: a twig with a blue fabric leaf attached at the top. While most in the stadium wore garments of yellow or blue, Rinakin dressed entirely in black, though at least his jacket had a blueish sheen. He was taller than me, and his skin had a slightly rosier tint to it, both traits that indicated his ancestors came from Reaching tree. In the days before ship travel, the denizens of each tree only intermixed when the trees bumped into each other across the miasma.

Now that Rinakin had lost his Council seat in the wave of Unity appointments, we were more or less equals—him as the leader of the



Independence Party and me as a cytonic. That felt strange; he was many seasons older than me and much wiser, yet here we were, now essentially the same status even if I didn't have his experience.

"It is good to have you home, Alanik," Rinakin said. "I was worried about you."

"It is good to be home," I said. "Even if it means I failed."

"Many of our people have failed between these branches," Rinakin said.

That was true. I remembered a time when failing in the games had felt like a tragedy. The stakes here were personal—members of the winning teams of even the junior league championships could expect to secure top spots as transit and cargo pilots or appointments to the air force, not that ReDawn had seen actual combat for generations.

I'd skipped over all that when my cytonic powers had manifested—I'd jumped from the junior leagues straight to the upper echelons of the fighting corps. As one of only five living UrDail cytonics and the only capable teleporter, I was theoretically invaluable to my people's survival.

Not that I'd done them much good during my last mission.

I sighed, leaning back against the wooden seat carved into the branch of the tree. The island trees floated in the miasma of ReDawn, their roots planted in large chunks of naturally occurring acclivity stone. The trees grew thick layers of bark, deep enough that entire rooms could be excavated beneath its surface without reaching the living parts of the tree near the base of the branches. Here, higher in the branches, one might be able to reach new wood by digging in six feet or so—plenty of room to carve smaller structures without harming the tree. This balcony and all of its seating had been meticulously carved into the bark, making it a part of the huge living stadium. It was good to be back beneath the familiar branches, but...

"I was supposed to bring back the secret to hyperdrive technology," I said. "Instead, I gave the opportunity to the humans. They'll try to make peace with the Superiority—make the same mistakes we have made."

"Perhaps," Rinakin said. "I'm more concerned that *we* will make the same mistakes we have made."

Given the number of yellow pennants flying in the stadium, the fear was reasonable.

“Besides, we have information now,” Rinakin said. “Not the information you left to retrieve, but important information all the same.”

Much less important, in my mind, but Rinakin had a point. Many of my people believed the humans had been exterminated for their refusal to capitulate, for their stubborn insistence on fighting for freedom instead of assimilating into the Superiority. Humans were a cautionary tale, a justification for the appeasement policies that gave the Superiority more and more control over ReDawn.

If it became known that the humans were alive, that they had somehow managed to resist all this time—indeed, that they were beginning to break free from the Superiority’s forced imprisonment—it would be a huge blow to the Unity movement. A weakness I hoped we could exploit to drag some kind of success from my failure.

Which was why I wanted to keep the information from Unity for as long as possible. We needed to figure out how to use it before they did.

Below, the teams lined up for another bout. As per the rules, the Unity team would now appoint a new stringer—the ship whose job it was to cut across the battlefield and make it to the opposing team’s hoop without getting tagged by the lasers. Each pilot had to take a turn as a stringer until everyone had had a turn, or until the other team could no longer catch up in points. A team couldn’t rely on one strong player—the tree was only as healthy as its weakest branch.

Unity selected their stringer—Havakal, one of their strongest offensive players. Independence had started with their best players in the hopes of building momentum—it was easier to perform at your best when you already felt like you were winning. Unity had saved their better players for last.

“They’re hoping to prey on our overconfidence,” I said. “But the Independence team will know that’s what they’re doing.”

“Yes,” Rinakin said. “But it may still work.”

I looked around at the cloud of blue and yellow pennants waved by the thousands of spectators gathered on their balconies. The colors were about even, which should have been a comfort. But they hadn't been even in the Council balancing, when Unity swept the Council seats, demolishing the Independence majority. I'd been gone for nineteen sleep cycles—missing the balancing entirely.

I'd left hoping to discover the secret that would free my people from Superiority control. If I had succeeded and returned before the balancing, the wind might have swept in our favor, but I'd returned with nothing, only to find us closer to bondage than ever.

I glanced over at Rinakin. He'd intimidated me at first, but though he expected a lot of me, he was never discouraging, only intense. In fact, there was an intensity about him even when he was relaxed. Rinakin wasn't a cytonic himself, though he'd mentored most of the UrDail cytonics as we'd come into our powers.

The other cytonics were all working with Unity now. And because the Superiority designated us as "dangerous," they'd agreed to use their cytonic abilities only under Council supervision.

We *were* dangerous to the Superiority. I would give them that.

Rinakin kept his focus on the hologram above. I'd attended games with him before, but when I'd been in training there had always been some lesson I was meant to learn, some larger goal.

Today we were here to keep up appearances. To prove I wasn't hiding from the Council and their questions since my return four sleep cycles before.

Even though I was.

The private balcony did afford us an opportunity to talk out of earshot of others. That was a luxury on the populous trees of ReDawn. "At least people are still flying our flag," I grumbled.

"Yes," Rinakin said. "But most of them have forgotten this is more than a sport."

"They remembered when they cast lots in the last Council balancing."

“That too is a sport,” Rinakin said. “They vote for their team, and some switch sides when their current team is losing.”

He was right, depressing as that was. Even most of my own family had switched sides in the balancing, voting for Unity instead of Independence. “But that doesn’t make any sense. If enough people change their votes it *causes* the other team to lose.”

Rinakin’s bone ridges arched. “That’s politics,” he said.

It *shouldn’t* be. The decisions of the Council determined everything, and when the balance of representatives shifted, so did the policies. The current Council was a Unity majority, with only a few Independence delegates remaining, so Unity chose the delegates who negotiated trade agreements with the Superiority.

The Superiority set the terms, of course. The Superiority always set the terms. But at least when the Independents were in control of the Council, they didn’t grovel at the feet of the Superiority hoping to be treated like favored pets.

Unity scored, and the hologram switched to a series of messages from sponsors—a transportation company showing off the interior of their new luxury ships, and the vineyards on String with a new limited juice flavor they hoped we would try. At the end of the endorsements, a familiar face dominated the air at the center of the branches.

Nanalis, new Council President and Unity High Chancellor. Her booming voice addressed the crowd from the speakers built into the floors of the balconies.

“Greetings, citizens of ReDawn,” Nanalis said, her voice proud and confident.

“What is *this*?” I muttered to Rinakin. “*Unity* is taking out endorsements now? That’s not allowed, is it?”

“They’re supposed to give us equal time,” Rinakin said. “But the Council recently decided to waive that requirement so long as the message isn’t overtly political.”

I wasn’t sure Nanalis was capable of a message that wasn’t overtly political. She continued to speak—no doubt this message was prerecorded.

Many Council members attended the games to see and be seen, but the Council President was often too busy.

Nanalis thanked the pilots for their hard work and preparation. “You represent the best of us, and it is because of you that our future is bright.”

I supposed it wasn’t out of line for the Council President to congratulate athletes. But then she went on.

“We call ourselves Unity and Independence, but we all enjoy the benefits of both freedom and peace. The real enemies are those who seek to divide ReDawn, who threaten our peace, who put the prosperity of all denizens in jeopardy.”

Unity was always calling us divisive for disagreeing, as if they weren’t doing the same by disagreeing with *us*. But of course, as they liked to say, the opposite of division was Unity. As if their choice of a name left us no other option but to fall in line with them. “She called us the enemy,” I said. “How exactly is that apolitical?”

“That’s why I argued against this in the last session,” Rinakin said. “Who is to determine what is ‘overt’ and what is not?”

As Nanalis made her final remarks, pennants waved all around the stadium, both blue and yellow. Everyone seemed to agree with her, Independence and Unity alike.

Everyone but us.

“Progress for ReDawn!” Nanalis declared. “May her enemies be swiftly silenced for the good of us all.”

Hairs rose on the back of my neck as voices sang out from all around the stadium, joining in a great rumbling chorus. They were cheering for pretty words that would destroy us.

*Progress for ReDawn.* It was what we all wanted, of course.

But some of us thought it mattered what we were progressing *toward*.

I knew which enemies she meant to swiftly silence. “I didn’t realize the miasma had gotten so thick,” I said.

Rinakin stared up at the hologram, which had cut away to feature the ships as they lined up for their next bout. “The wind has shifted,” Rinakin said. “I fear it grows more toxic all the time.”

The ships flew across the field for the next bout, but all I could see were the waving blue pennants, each one representing a person who should have been ready to fight for our planet, for our *home*, but was instead allied with Unity, who wanted to give it all away.

“I think we should leave the match now,” Rinakin said. “I don’t know how many will believe we are the enemy, but I would rather not be caught in the crowd.”

Cheers went up again, and yellow fireworks filled the air—Unity was gaining on us now.

I didn’t want to watch the match turn on us. “Yes,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We stepped onto the stairs that wound down the branch, passing more private balconies and some larger ones crammed with families—children riding on parents’ shoulders, waving yellow flags. When we reached a crook in the branch we followed it down the stairs to the platforms around the trunk, descending beneath the playing field to Rinakin’s small transport ship, made of dark metal mined from the core of the planet.

I was still bitter about the loss of my own ship, which had been effectively stolen by the humans. I’d put in a request for another, but the order was taking time to process. Normally I would have been granted one instantly due to my status as a cytonic. But the Unity officials must have wanted something to hold over my head until I told them where I’d been and what I’d learned while I was gone. By law, they couldn’t force me. I would have been happy to report to the previous Council, but now I would be facing a room full of Unity officials with very few friendly faces.

I guessed they were growing tired of me putting them off.

I climbed into the copilot seat, preferring to sit beside Rinakin rather than on the cushier seats behind us. Rinakin flew us away from the Stadium tree through the purple and red swirls of gas in the miasma. Somewhere far below us was the core of the planet, noxious and uninhabitable, visited only by the mining corps in heavy protective gear. We were in a day cycle—and still a few sleep cycles away from the fall of night—so the ambient light was fairly bright.

We flew into the atmospheric bubble of Industry, one of the largest of the trees, which housed nearly a quarter of the population of ReDawn. The branches of Industry reached horizontally away from the trunk of the tree in all directions, and towers stretched into the space above them, while shorter buildings were suspended downward from beneath. Several kilometers from the trunk, the branches reached for the sky, with structures built in spiral patterns winding up the branches all the way to the tips. The air was thinner here, as the tree processed the toxins out of the atmosphere and produced the oxygen we needed to breathe.

A voice reached into my mind unbidden, though I wished I could ignore it.

*Alanik, it said. You and Rinakin left the match before I could speak to you. We would like to meet with you in the Council chambers immediately.*

“What is it?” Rinakin asked.

“Quilan,” I said. He was one of the Unity cytonics, the closest to my age, though he was a few seasons older. “He wants us to meet him at the Council tree.”

If he’d noticed we’d left the stadium early, he’d been watching us. Probably planning to move on us in the stadium, where it would be harder for us to refuse an escort. Where if we resisted they could accuse us of making a scene, turn public opinion against us.

As if the wind weren’t already blowing that way.

## Two

“I’m not going to meet with them on their terms,” I said. I could hyperjump from almost anywhere on ReDawn, but the Council tree—the capital of ReDawn—was home to the other four cytonics. Working together, they could create a cytonic inhibitor, a field from which I’d be unable to escape.

They could all come to me, of course, but it would be much easier for them to catch me if I agreed to walk right into their jaws.

“Offer to meet them in a neutral location,” Rinakin said.

“I don’t want to,” I said. “Too much risk. They’ll bring the other cytonics.”

Rinakin pressed his lips together. I was right and he knew it.

*Alanik, Quilan said. Please respond.*

*I will not be meeting with the Council at this time, I answered. I will let you know when I am next available.*

*I’m sorry, Alanik, Quilan said. But your attendance is required.*

“He’s not asking,” I said. “He wants us to believe we don’t have a choice.” Though of course we did. As long as we could escape from them, we would always have a choice. To believe otherwise was to hand over our own power, the way they wanted to hand ReDawn over to the Superiority.

“Soon we may not,” Rinakin said. “The Council voted to consolidate the military. Many of the Independence bases are already submitting to the Council’s control.”

I stared at him. ReDawn had maintained two air forces since the end of the last war. We competed and drilled against each other, with the understanding that if ReDawn faced a common threat we would work together to fight it. The division kept us sharp, each side trying to maintain an edge against the other.

“They’re getting ready to move against us,” I said.

“Yes,” Rinakin said. “And they’re doing it in the name of peace.”



There hadn't been real fighting on ReDawn in almost a century, and both Unity and the Superiority promised peace and cooperation. Never mind that the Superiority had kept us contained here all this time, punishing us for rebellion. Never mind that if we accepted their peace, we also had to accept their control over every aspect of our technology, our travel, our behavior, our culture. They'd already made us paupers, withholding advanced technology from us because we rejected their rule. Now they would make us beggars as well, stripping us of our dignity and our heritage in the process.

And so many of my people accepted it. A prisoner could be convinced that they lived in a paradise, if the prison was pretty enough.

"Is there anyone left who will fight with us?"

"The base on Hollow refused to unify," Rinakin said. "I sent my daughter and her family there. But I'm afraid they won't be able to hold out long."

My brother Gilaf was stationed at Hollow. He and his flightmates helped supervise the lumber work there. Unlike the rest of my family, Gilaf wasn't going to swallow Unity lies.

"If the other Independence bases see that there are holdouts, maybe they'll reverse course," I said.

"That is my hope, but I expect Unity will mobilize their forces quickly to bring them in line."

It was hard to imagine my people firing on each other, but Unity always seemed more willing to strike out at us than at the Superiority.

"How can they do that and claim it's for peace?" I asked.

Rinakin didn't answer that question. I already knew the answer anyway.

It was easier to believe the story they were told than to awaken to the reality of our oppression.

"What we need," Rinakin said, "are some allies who have not forgotten that we are at war."

I tapped my sharp nails on the dashboard of the ship. "I know," I said. When Rinakin originally suggested that I answer the call to join the Superiority military, I'd been excited. Finally, something I could *do*. All anyone on ReDawn ever seemed to want to do was *talk*. Even though I

hadn't made it to the tryouts, discovering that our old human allies were still alive and fighting should have been a victory.

But then those former allies kept me unconscious for weeks, woke me only when they needed something, and then treated me like a prisoner.

Still, I remembered the desperation of the woman who spoke to me first. *They want my people dead. We need your help.* She at least seemed to understand the gravity of the situation.

And the other one—Jorgen, the male cytonic. He was clearly untrained, to the point that he didn't know how to communicate properly. But I did get a bit of emotion from him through his cytonic resonance, enough to know he wasn't happy with the direction things were going.

He was *scared*.

But at least the humans knew what it was like to fight back.

"The humans are facing the same problem we are," I said. "Their leaders are looking for a way to end the war. If we appeal to them for help, they could side with Unity."

"I don't think that will happen," Rinakin said. "The Council has received a directive from the Superiority. There's someone new in charge apparently, and they're demanding we turn over the humans we're harboring."

I stared at Rinakin. "We're not harboring humans, are we?"

"No," Rinakin said. "But a human took your place and infiltrated the Superiority. How are the Superiority to assume that happened?"

By the branches. "They think I was working with the humans."

"They think *we* are working with the humans," Rinakin said. "And now they've issued an ultimatum. Turn over the fugitives—"

"Or they will very politely destroy us," I said. "Which isn't aggressive at all, I'm sure."

"They'll justify it," Rinakin said.

They justified everything. And more than half of my people would parrot the justification as if it made sense, simply because the Superiority said it.

"You think I should return to the humans and ask for help." In hindsight I should have stayed longer, tried harder to discern their true intentions. But

I'd been disoriented, alarmed at how long I'd been unconscious, how much I might have missed.

And I *really* did not like that nasty government woman.

I'd thought the myth of human aggression was propaganda spread by the Superiority. Now I wasn't so sure. And if they were as aggressive as the Superiority said, they could be good allies to have right now.

They also could be twice as dangerous if they turned against us.

"The Superiority controls us by dividing us," Rinakin said. "That's why they wanted us to think the humans were eradicated. They're afraid of what we can do together."

That sounded like a Unity argument, but I saw his point. From what little I'd seen, we had more knowledge of cytonics and politics, while the humans had real fighting experience, something no one on ReDawn had anymore.

"I don't know how strong the human military force is," I said. "Or how many ships they might be willing to send our way." If any. My last meeting with them had gone poorly—I hadn't endeared myself to their leadership, nor them to me.

"Then perhaps they would take us in as refugees," Rinakin said. "We could begin to build a resistance from their planet, the way they once mounted a resistance from ours." He glanced over at me. "If the humans joined us, it might grant us the most important resource. Hope."

I didn't like relying on flighty emotions, but Rinakin was right. The humans might be our best option.

They might be our *only* option.

"Or, we could use your knowledge of the humans to buy us time," Rinakin said. "If we seem like we're cooperating, Unity might leave us alone a while longer."

He didn't sound any more excited about that prospect than I was. "If we give the Superiority what they want, we're playing right into their hands."

"Yes. But the Superiority might not be our most pressing concern."

"I don't want to tell Unity I found humans," I said. "We should be using that information to discredit them."

“I agree,” Rinakin said. “That’s why I think you should return and ask the humans for help, while I go to the Council and try to reason with them.”

“They won’t *see* reason,” I said.

“They might,” Rinakin said. “Most of Unity’s supporters are blowing their way because they don’t see any other choice. If you bring the humans to our aid, you give them another option, another path. Remind the humans of our old alliance, and our potential as current allies. If you succeed, someone is going to have to advocate for that option with the Council. Will it be you?”

I sighed. We both knew I wasn’t a diplomat. Rinakin wasn’t a Council member anymore, but he was the High Chancellor of the Independents. The members of the Council listened to him—those left on our side, at least.

Still. “You can’t cooperate with them,” I said. “That is their way.”

“Cooperation is not evil, Alanik,” Rinakin said. “It depends entirely upon who you are cooperating *with*.”

“It’s evil to cooperate with *them*,” I insisted. “They want to work with our oppressors.”

“We all want the same thing,” Rinakin said. “Peace for ReDawn.”

“But the way they’re going about it is *wrong*.”

“It is. And someone has to continue to tell them that, so they can’t forget there’s another way.”

Rinakin exited Industry’s airspace and turned toward Spindle, a smaller tree where we both made our homes. An alert flashed on the panel—the color indicated that we were ordered to stop at the nearest landing bay for inspection by a government vehicle. Normally this alert was used for traffic violations, though we were flying at regulation speed through open airspace.

*Alanik, Quilan said in my head. We’ve come to escort you to the Council chambers. Please ground your ship.*

I dug my nails into the plush armrest. “It’s Quilan,” I said. He wasn’t a teleporter, but he did have access to cytonic skills I hadn’t yet been able to access—including concussion bolts and mindblades. Last I knew, he wasn’t strong enough to use the mindblades effectively, making him as dangerous

to himself as he was to others. “He wants us to land so he can escort me to the Council.”

“You can flee to Hollow,” Rinakin said. “But they’ll come for you there, and you won’t have enough people to defend yourselves. We simply don’t have enough pilots to resist them.”

Rinakin turned the ship toward the nearest landing bay, a loading dock for one of the lumber yards. We cruised over a lot filled with old bark that had been stripped away. It would be turned into remanufactured wood in a pressing facility nearby and used for buildings that couldn’t be hollowed from the branches.

The ship following us pulled up over our left wing to escort us down into the landing bay. Rinakin turned off his boosters and lowered his altitude lever, bringing us down onto the smooth, shaved wooden surface.

As he did, Quilan’s voice reached into my mind again. *I’m here in peace*, he said. *This doesn’t have to get aggressive.*

I dug my nails harder into the armrest. His words made me want to scream. There was nothing quite so frustrating as soft words being wielded like clubs. At least a straightforward attack was honest; everyone could see it for what it was.

Later, when the Council discussed this, Quilan would testify that he was perfectly docile and reasonable, and I was going to look like the problem.

My fingers pierced through the armrest. I was going to owe Rinakin for repairs, but I wasn’t sorry. It felt *good*.

If that made me aggressive, so be it.

“I don’t like leaving you here,” I said. “You could come with me.”

“Our branches fork here,” Rinakin said. “But we’re still connected at the root.”

Pretty words that meant there was no convincing him otherwise.

I reached across the negative realm, searching for that strange planet, the rock with the eerie, clear atmosphere surrounded by orbital platforms and a thick layer of debris.

I found it, but as I tried to form the coordinates in my mind, the surface of the planet felt slippery. Empty. Blank.

They had a cytonic inhibitor. When had *that* happened? That hadn't been there when I'd left them. I didn't think they had enough cytonics or enough knowledge to form one—this was probably more similar to the ones used by the Superiority, especially because it seemed to cover the entire planet.

I scanned over the area searching for a gap, but I found none. Instead I sensed a mind hovering in their atmosphere—Jorgen. His abilities were still active, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to find him.

Superiority cytonic inhibitors operated with a key—a set of impressions that allowed a cytonic to bypass the inhibitor. That made the inhibitors particularly nasty, neutralizing all cytonics except for those the Superiority sanctioned. I didn't imagine the Superiority had handed the humans one—they must have somehow found one on their own.

At least I could speak to Jorgen, even if I couldn't hyperjump to his location.

Rinakin released the ship doors and stepped out with his hands held clearly in front of him. “Quilan!” Rinakin said. “Thank you for escorting me. I was going home to prepare, but since you've gone to the trouble I'd be happy to come with you now. Alanik has business of her own to attend to, so I'm afraid she's going to have to request an extension—”

A flare of cytonic energy blasted from Quilan—a concussion bolt that sent Rinakin to his knees.

## Three

Rinakin knelt, looking up at Quilan, who remained in his ship. He'd been stunned by the bolt—a mindblade cut through physical material, but a concussion bolt passed right through it, bouncing around inside your skull. Quilan had surprised Rinakin, hit him dead on. He'd be stunned for a few minutes at least, and would probably have a headache for days.

Two security guards stepped up on either side of Rinakin, each taking him by an arm. They weren't rough with him, but they placed their hands on him firmly and hustled him into the hold of the ship.

*I thought this didn't have to get aggressive, I sent to Quilan. He was going to come with you.*

*We welcome your cooperation,* Quilan said.

I had to get out of here, but if they were going to hurt Rinakin, I was bringing him with me whether he liked it or not.

I couldn't let them take him, not to hand over to the Superiority. I could hyperjump to him—one touch and I could take him with me as I escaped. I reached toward the ship, past Quilan, who stared at me with a hard look on his face. Into the back, where I could see the bone ridges of the top of Rinakin's head, where he sat sandwiched between the two guards.

My mind hit a pocket of dead space.

*No.* They had a cytonic inhibitor on board, creating a space behind Quilan that I couldn't reach with my powers, even though Quilan could obviously use his.

Cytonic inhibitors required cooperation from multiple cytonics, but if Quilan had brought everyone he would have surrounded the ship to keep me from escaping as well. Beyond Rinakin and the guards, I spotted two diones with bright blue skin. This was Superiority technology, run by those diones because the Superiority would never entrust something that powerful to a “lesser species.”

Unity was already working with the enemy, trading away ReDawn's autonomy for the ability to destroy the Independence.

*Alanik*, Quilan said. *Step out of the ship, if you would.* He sounded so reasonable, which only made me angrier.

I wasn't coming with him. I reached into the negative realm toward his mind, ready to tell him so, when I caught a bit of cytonic communication coming into his ship.

*—have them yet?* someone asked.

*Not yet*, Quilan responded. *—picking them up—*

*—getting impatient...wants humans, but we don't have them...they will have to do. We need to make the offer before—*

I paused, my hands on the altitude control. Quilan's ship hovered over my wing, but if I engaged my boosters, I could shoot out from under his wing and then ascend. I'd flown with Quilan in the junior leagues. I knew I was a better pilot.

But what was *that*? The Council was getting impatient. They didn't have any harbored humans to turn over, so instead they were going to make an offer.

What were they offering?

Rinakin and me?

I wasn't going to be their next bargaining piece. But Rinakin—they were going to give up the leader of the anti-Superiority movement as an offering to appease them.

*You're going to give us to them?* I asked Quilan.

*Your cooperation is appreciated*, Quilan said.

This wasn't happening.

I couldn't hyperjump in there. I couldn't save Rinakin.

The only thing I could do was run.

I twisted the dial that fired the boosters.

The ship roared to life, but it only jerked forward a few inches. I twisted around to look and found that Quilan had used a light hook to hold my ship in place. He climbed out of his ship, walking with a brisk step. He might



want to convince me that he came in peace, but he also didn't want to give me time to escape.

As long as I didn't let him get me in the back of that ship, he couldn't keep me here.

"Alanik," Quilan called. He was no longer speaking to me cytonically, possibly trying to distract me from anything else I might hear. "Come with us, and we can get this all worked out." He slowed as he approached the door to the ship.

I was going to have to leave this ship behind, but I might be able to get a new one at Hollow. I reached through the negative realm, forming the coordinates for the base on Hollow in my mind. If that base was the last holdout, I could take shelter there while I made contact with the humans. I'd also be better positioned to get my people out if things went wrong.

"I'm sorry, Alanik," Quilan said. "I thought you might still see reason." He sent a concussion bolt flying into the ship. I felt it coming and ducked just in time, missing most of it, though my ears rang and my vision swam.

I ripped into the negative realm, hanging there for a gut-dropping moment, staring out at thousands of white eyes that all focused on me. I felt lost here as I always did, slack and untethered like a streamer torn free of its post, floating for a moment before fluttering inevitably downward into the dark. The eyes regarded me as a trespasser—

And then I returned to myself. I stood in a vestibule in the Independence base on Hollow, a tree even larger than Industry, though far less populated. This tree was dead, and was now used mostly for lumber harvesting.

Through the enormous window comprising one wall of the vestibule, I could see Wandering Leaf—an abandoned military platform similar to the ones that had shot me down when I first visited the human planet—drifting in the miasma. The platform was slowly migrating closer to Hollow, though if it had to threaten any of our trees with its autoturrets, at least it was a sparsely populated one.

The base around me was silent, the hallways empty. That was odd—there were usually a hundred people in residence here helping with the lumber

transportation, keeping an eye on Wandering Leaf, and monitoring the tree itself for signs that it was becoming unstable.

“Secure the area,” a voice said at the end of the hall, and I pivoted to see several people approaching. They were wearing Unity pilot uniforms, yellow leaves emblazoned on their shoulders.

They’d already taken the base. So where were the Independence pilots? I ducked back into the corner, hiding in a recess until the Unity pilots had passed me by.

Motion through the window caught my eye. I looked down to see a Unity ship hovering just under the branch, outside the base’s landing bay. It would be dangerous to hyperjump again so soon, especially if I wanted to bring my brother or some of the other Independence pilots with me when I jumped out again. I’d never done many jumps so close together before—the more times I hyperjumped in quick succession, the more I would draw the attention of the eyes. Being a teleporter was considered one of the most hazardous of the cytonic skills, because we traveled physically through the negative realm.

We didn’t always come back. But the risk would be worth it if I could get us all to safety.

When I reached into the negative realm, the surface of that ship felt smooth and impenetrable—blank, like the inside of the ship that had taken Rinakin.

Another Superiority inhibitor.

Unity wasn’t going to turn us *all* over, were they?

*Alanik*, Quilan said in my mind. He’d found me again, though he was still near Industry and he couldn’t hyperjump after me. *Come back so we can discuss this.*

So they could capture me was more like it.

Rinakin was right. We needed allies who knew how to fight. If I could convince the humans to side with us instead of the Superiority, maybe we could remind my people of our heritage of resistance, remind them of what we were capable of.

I reached through the negative realm toward the human planet, finding Jorgen again.

*I need to speak with you,* I sent to his mind. *Can you give me the code to return to your planet?*

*Alanik?* Jorgen said.

*Yes,* I answered. *I would like to return to speak with you, though I need the code to your inhibitor.*

*Our what?*

I closed my eyes. He didn't even know he had the code. Those leaves were the same color as the ones I'd seen when I met him.

Boots marched down the hallway toward me. I might be able to hide here a bit longer—

*Alanik,* Quilan said. *You're not going to find any friends on Hollow today.*

I took a deep breath. Quilan knew where I was. He could easily send a hypercommunication to the Unity officials here. They'd be looking for me. I reached into the negative realm, and sure enough I could hear his chatter.

*—catch her—* Quilan was saying. *—convince the Superiority—worth more than all of them combined—*

I shook my head. Quilan and the others were trying to prove their value to the Superiority. They'd accepted aid to contain us in the form of those ships, but if they didn't do the work themselves, they wouldn't earn any favor.

And I was the rebel cytonic, the biggest prize of all.

I had to get out of here.

*You have a code in your mind,* I sent to Jorgen. *It lets you use your cytonic powers on your planet. I can't return unless you give it to me.*

*You used cytonics here before,* he replied.

I did not have time for this. *You have an inhibitor now,* I said to Jorgen. *And you know that code, even if you don't know that you know it.*

*Um, I'm not sure how to give you that. Let me go talk to Command, see if they'll—*

*I'm in kind of a bind here, I said. There's no time for that. There's an impression in your mind. Try to think about allowing me to come there. Try to will it to me.*

*I mean, I think you're welcome to come back. I'm sure Command would like to speak with you again.*

The words didn't come with an impression. They were useless to me.

"Find her," a voice said from down the hall.

*The impression is in there, I said to Jorgen. How do you access your cytonics? Do you have exercises?*

*I meditate, Jorgen said.*

*Try that, I said. Do it fast.*

*Hang on, I'm trying.* I could feel Jorgen's cytonic resonance growing stronger as he deepened his connection with the negative realm. He was welcoming me into his mind, giving me access to his deeper thoughts.

More footsteps. One of the Unity pilots turned a corner, stepping into view.

*Alanik? Jorgen said. Is it working?*

I reached into his mind as he reached into mine.

*There.* An impression, like a cytonic key. I copied it, embedding it in my own thoughts, and reached toward the human planet, which took shape again, feeling solid. Accessible. I focused on that place, forming the coordinates.

The Unity pilot's bright eyes fixed on me. "She's here!" he said.

Quilan's voice filled my mind. *This is a mistake, Alanik,* he said. *You can't run from us forever.*

*We're going to find out,* I said.

And then I pulled myself into the negative realm and left my people behind.

## Four

When I emerged from the negative realm, escaping from the ire of the eyes, I stood in the infirmary room I'd fled when I left the humans. It was empty, the overhead lights turned off.

The first time I'd hyperjumped to Detritus, I'd been shot down by the automated weapons that guarded their planet. My wounds had mostly healed while they kept me unconscious here—not that I was inclined to thank them for keeping me in a coma. I was still technically supposed to be taking it easy, and felt twinges in my abdomen if I overdid it.

Thankfully, hyperjumping wasn't physically strenuous.

I pressed my back against the wall by the window so I wouldn't be visible from the hall, then reached out, trying to find Jorgen. The building around me buzzed with a surprising amount of cytonic energy. At first I wondered if the humans had far more cytonics among them than I'd previously supposed, but no, these minds felt different, their energy more subtle—like the difference between a large fruit and a tiny seed.

Potential cytonics perhaps? If the humans had this many, they'd be formidable allies indeed.

I found Jorgen's mind, with two of the smaller resonances hovering near him.

*I made it, I said. Thank you for your help.*

*Oh, good, he said. I lost track of you, and I thought maybe something bad had happened.*

Several bad things, in fact. *I need to talk to you, I said. Can you come alone?* He'd wanted to alert his commanders to my presence, and maybe he already had. But I wasn't eager to speak with them again until I had someone on my side, given how poorly things had gone last time.

*Where are you?*

He couldn't locate me, then. That wasn't a surprise. He was untrained, and of all the cytonics on ReDawn, I was by far the best at picking out locations and individual cytonics in the negative realm. I sent him a picture of the infirmary room.

Jorgen paused. *Can I bring FM?*

That human woman. I'd liked her. *Yes, but only her.*

*On my way*, Jorgen answered.

I wished I'd been able to choose someplace with more space, where I might be able to get a look at the humans before they found me. But I had the key to their inhibitor now, so they wouldn't be able to stop me from leaving again if it came to that.

But if I left, I'd be no better off, with no way to help retake our base and no leverage to inspire the rest of the Independence military to do the same.

I tracked Jorgen as he moved through the building, first away from me, and then closer. The door to the infirmary opened, and Jorgen and FM stepped in, shutting the door behind them. FM's hair was lighter, similar to an UrDail's though it had an odd golden quality to it, while Jorgen's was dark and tightly curled. The cuts on his face were almost healed, the bandages gone. FM drew a curtain across the window, and they left the lights off.

They weren't any more eager to be caught by their commanders than I was.

"Alanik," FM said. She had one of the translation pins they'd found in my ship, though it barely changed the sound of my name. I spoke fluent Mandarin, which was a human language still in use on ReDawn, but these humans spoke English, and I only knew a few words of that one. "You came back! We didn't think you would." FM smiled. Her face looked so strange, all naked skin with no protrusions, like the bone ridges had been filed off. "It's good to see you again. How are you feeling?"

It took me a moment to realize she was referencing my injuries. Last time she'd seen me, I'd been in a hospital bed.

"I'm well," I said. "And you?"

“Um, we’re fine,” Jorgen said. “We’re glad you’re back, but—what are you doing here?”

Straight to the point then. I liked that, but it was the opposite of what my espionage trainer, Finis, had taught me before I’d left for Starsight. Many species were suspicious of direct requests. They saw them as too aggressive. I wasn’t much of a spy, but I was the only cytonic who could answer the summons by hyperjumping in my own ship, and who could have the chance to hyperjump back out again if things went wrong. I’d failed, and these humans had succeeded in my place.

If they wanted to be aggressive that was fine by me, but I hadn’t forgotten everything Finis had taught me.

“I need help,” I said. “And I’d like to offer assistance in return. Your people are in a poor position with the Superiority.”

“That’s an understatement,” Jorgen said. He was about to go on when two brightly colored animals appeared on his shoulders—sluglike creatures with bulbous heads and spines running down their backs. One was yellow with blue spines and the other red with black stripes, and each emitted one of the smaller cytonic resonances I’d felt before.

Had those animals just *hyperjumped*?

“Jorgen!” the yellow one said.

I took a step back into the corner.

They also talked?

“Hi, Snuggles,” Jorgen said. The pin translated “Snuggles” as a cuddling action, but the slug looked too spiky to cuddle with to me. Jorgen shot an irritated glance at FM. “I thought you were working on that stay command.”

“We’re *working* on it,” FM said. “Gill is getting pretty good, but—”

“Gill!” the yellow slug said, and then it disappeared and reappeared again on the floor by FM’s feet with a second yellow and blue slug in tow, this one with blue markings framing its head.

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “I see that Gill is great at it.”

“To be fair,” FM said, “that wasn’t his fault.”

“Gill!” Snuggles said triumphantly.

Jorgen sighed, and FM pulled a fabric sling out of her pocket, wrapping it over her shoulder. She picked up the slug from the floor and tucked it into the pouch, petting it on its spines.

I stared at them all. “What is that?” I asked.

“It’s a taynix,” FM said. The creature leaned toward me out of the sling. Its body was long and thin, like the wood leeches that sometimes infested the bark of the trees back home.

I was familiar with several alien species, but not one that looked like this. “Are they intelligent?” I asked.

“Yes,” FM said.

“Sort of,” Jorgen corrected her.

“Not as intelligent as humans,” FM allowed. “They don’t actually talk. They repeat things we say.”

“Things we say!” Gill said.

“Yes, like that,” FM said. “Thanks, Gill.”

“And they hyperjump,” I said.

Jorgen closed his eyes. “Yes. So much for not revealing all of our secrets immediately. Thanks a lot, Snuggles.”

“Snuggles!” Gill repeated.

This was officially the strangest meeting I’d ever had, but at least I’d already learned something. “The creatures are cytonic,” I said. “I can feel them in my mind.”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. He peered around the side of the curtain, like he was afraid we would be overheard. “But don’t try to communicate with this one.” He indicated the one riding on his shoulder. This taynix was red with black stripes down its sides and black spines running down the center of its back. “He’s...temperamental. I can’t go through that again.”

“Again!” the red slug said. Its voice was deeper than the others, and somehow more disconcerting.

“But you’re not here to talk about slugs,” FM said. “You said you needed help? I’m surprised you’d come to us, after the way you were treated last time.”



“I don’t want to judge your whole people by the actions of a few,” I said carefully. “I would not like it if you judged my people by the actions of some that I know.”

FM smiled. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

They both watched me expectantly. We’d certainly been through the small talk portion of the conversation that Finis recommended, even if we’d been talking about teleporting slugs, which was definitely not part of my espionage primer. “Some of my people have decided to align themselves with our common enemy,” I said. “I think both our peoples could benefit from an alliance.”

FM and Jorgen looked at each other. “I agree,” Jorgen said carefully, “but I don’t have the authority to make one.”

I’d been too aggressive. Maybe humans *were* more like the peoples Finis had prepared me to address. “But you are a cytonic,” I said. “Surely you have *some* sway in what your leaders decide.”

Jorgen and FM exchanged another glance. “Is that what it’s like on your planet?” Jorgen asked. “The cytonics are in charge?”

“Not in charge,” I said. The Unity leaders weren’t cytonic, and neither was Rinakin, though he was the highest ranked Independence official. “But we are respected for our powers.”

The Unity leaders respected the cytonics who sided with them, at least.

“Things are different here,” Jorgen said. “Our people are afraid of cytonics. The Superiority has used them against us in the past.”

Of course they would, if given the opportunity. “So you see that the Superiority is not to be trusted.”

“Yes,” FM said. “We’ve been fighting them for decades. You said you were afraid we would trust them, but they haven’t even offered us peace. We are looking for allies though, and there’s a former Superiority Minister in residence here who—”

“They are here?” I asked. The Superiority sent representatives to ReDawn of course, under the guise of checking on our progress as a people. They were like squirrel keepers checking the cages. They never came too close, in case we would bite.

“Cuna isn’t in good standing with the Superiority,” FM said quickly. “The Superiority tried to kill them, and we rescued them. We’re not looking to join the Superiority, Alanik. And we do need allies against them.”

That was good. If this Cuna had turned against the Superiority, they might have information my people could use. “Is Cuna cytonic?”

“No,” Jorgen said. “Aside from Spensa, we only have two cytonics. Spensa’s grandmother and myself.”

That was important information, and he probably shouldn’t have given it up so easily. I needed to keep them talking, see what else I might learn. If they decided not to send help, at least I’d be armed with more information. This was going much better than our last conversation, when that angry woman threatened to keep me as a prisoner.

“Spensa still hasn’t returned from Starsight?” I asked.

Jorgen took a deep breath. “She did. But she’s...gone again.”

“How did she go there without drawing attention to herself?” I asked. “She sent a message to my people saying she was pretending to be me, but her ruse should have been discovered immediately. How was she able to disguise herself?” I’d been in shock and in pain when I’d given Spensa the coordinates. I’d never been clear on the details of how she’d managed to use them.

“We had a ship with advanced holographic technology,” Jorgen said. “Technology even the Superiority doesn’t have. Spensa was able to use a hologram to make herself look like you.”

“That is clever.” A resource like that could be used to walk right onto the Council tree and break Rinakin out without the use of cytonics.

“It was,” Jorgen said. “But the ship didn’t make it back from Starsight. We can’t use that trick anymore.”

Another broken branch.

“What are you hoping to gain from an alliance with us?” FM asked.

I set my shoulders. This was the opening Finis had taught me to look for. A direct inquiry to my intentions, an invitation to announce what I needed. Time to get to the point, to beg them to send a military force back with me. Quilan wanted to capture me first, but he wouldn’t wait forever before he

transported the rest of the resistance to the Superiority. I didn't know what they would do with us.

I also didn't want to find out.

"Your people know very little about cytonics," I said. "I don't know everything, but I could offer more instruction than you have now. As for what I need—the Superiority already believes that my people are working with yours, because Spensa was discovered to be a human disguised as an UrDail. They've demanded we turn in our human co-conspirators, but of course we have none, so instead our government wants to turn me and other resistance members over to them instead."

"They're going to turn over their cytonics to the Superiority?" FM asked. "That seems unwise."

"They've already captured our faction's High Chancellor, who champions independence for ReDawn. By turning him over to the Superiority, those who seek unification will find themselves unopposed."

"They're trying to use the Superiority to take out their political enemies," Jorgen said. "Because that can't go wrong."

FM shook her head. "Two birds with one stone, the saying goes."

The pin didn't have a direct translation for that first part. "What's a bird?" I asked.

"A flying animal," FM said. "We don't really have them anymore. They were a thing from Earth. You don't have birds on ReDawn?"

"We don't have creatures that fly," I said. "Anything that strays too far from the trees without an atmospheric generator will choke on the miasma."

Both Jorgen and FM blinked at me.

They clearly had no idea what I was talking about, but it was also beside the point. "As for what I hope to gain, I'm hoping that your people would be willing to help me defend mine against the Superiority."

"We can't promise you anything," Jorgen said. "But if you'll come with us to talk to our admiral—"

"Is this the woman who tried to interrogate me?" I asked. "I'd hoped to avoid involving her."

“You’ve met Admiral Cobb, but he didn’t get to say much,” FM said. “He’s...much more reasonable than Jeshua Weight, the woman you ran from. But yes, she will probably be there, especially if you want to meet with Minister Cuna.”

I doubted Jeshua Weight was going to want to work with me. I knew her type—always reaching for power, never wanting to extend any in return. “And if your leaders refuse an alliance?” I asked.

Jorgen and FM exchanged another look. “There’s nothing we can do for you without their permission. That’s not the way it works here.”

“Here!” chimed the red slug on Jorgen’s shoulder.

“Not now, Boomslug,” Jorgen said.

“Boomslug!” sang both yellow slugs, and they hyperjumped onto Jorgen’s shoulders with the red slug. All three slid off and rolled onto the ground at his feet.

The pin translated “Boomslug” to mean a mollusk that explodes.

That was ominous.

Jorgen shook his head. “We really need to get them to only do that when they’re given the code word.”

“Rig and I are working on it,” FM said. “But I think they like each other more than they like caviar, so it’s slow going.”

I had no idea what that meant, but I didn’t think these two were going to help me unless I spoke to their leaders. At least this time I was in a better position. They knew I wasn’t their prisoner, and an alliance would be advantageous to us all.

I’d come this far. I wasn’t going to go home without trying everything.

“All right,” I said. “I will speak with your admiral.”

“Good,” Jorgen said. “I really think we can all benefit from working together. I could use some coaching in cytonics, if you haven’t noticed.”

“I noticed,” I said. All cytonics had slightly different capabilities, but I could show him the basics at least. At some point, we all had to figure out the nuances of our powers on our own.

“So that’s settled, then,” FM said. “I can wait here with you while Jorgen sets up a meeting, if you want.”

“Please,” I said, and Jorgen returned Gill to FM before leaving to talk to his leaders.

I hoped my meeting with them went better this time, because otherwise I had come a very long way for nothing.

## Five

It didn't take long for Jorgen's admiral to agree to a meeting. FM and her strange slug kept me company in the infirmary while we waited for Jorgen to send word that they were ready for us.

"What are you doing with the taynix anyway?" I asked her.

"Bonding," FM said. "I shouldn't say too much, but it's a new program the pilots are trying out."

The pilots were bonding with creatures that could hyperjump. After one of their own had infiltrated the Superiority in my place, trying to find the secret to hyperdrives.

The humans, as it turned out, had found it.

"You can use them to hyperjump," I guessed. "Even if you aren't cytonic?"

FM winced. "I really don't have the clearance to tell you that."

"You didn't tell me," I said. "Your slugs revealed it."

"Yeah, we really do need to figure out how to get them to only do that on command. It gets really confusing when they want to buddy up every time we mention their names."

I stared at the taynix, which was tucked back in FM's sling, nuzzling the crook of her elbow. If those things were the key to Superiority hyperdrives, I would need to take at least one with me if I had to flee.

A radio attached to FM's belt made a beeping noise, and then Jorgen's voice spoke. "We're ready," he said. "FM, can you bring Alanik to the command room?"

"We're on our way," FM said, and she smiled at me in a way that was probably meant to be reassuring.

FM led me through the stark metal hallways. My body felt lighter, my steps bouncier than expected—the gravitational pull of Detritus had to be slightly less than ReDawn.

Everything on this platform was so flat, the ceilings so low, not like the buildings at home—which would wind up the branches of the trees, filled with ramps and stairs on the inside and the outside. On some of the wide lower branches, where flat horizontal ground was easier to come by, a building might have a wide first story, but then it would soar upward, making use of the space above it, or spiral around the branches with lower floors built on the bottom side of the branches.

Who wanted to live in a building that was so...squashed? I felt like the ceiling was pressing down on me, closing me in.

Before we reached their command room, we passed beneath a large skylight through which I could see the other platforms that traveled above. They looked a lot like Wandering Leaf, though there were so many more of them.

“Was this an outpost during the last human war?” I asked. “Is that how you became trapped here?”

“No,” FM said. “The technology here is a lot older. Our people were travelers with a small fleet of ships. We crashed here and were imprisoned by the Superiority after the war ended.”

I wondered if there were more humans hiding in pockets across the universe. The people here had been resourceful enough to survive.

As we walked, I caught glimpses of an electric blue barrier stretching across the sky between the platforms above. “What is that?” I asked.

“Our planetary shield,” FM said. “It protects us from the Superiority gunships. Jorgen told me we apparently have a cytonic inhibitor? I guess that must have activated around the same time we put the shield up. We still don’t really understand how all these systems work.”

If I had more information about that, I could have used it as currency, but most of this technology was foreign to me as well. Jorgen had the key to the inhibitor in his mind, but he hadn’t known it existed. I wondered if being born here attuned him to it somehow. That would also explain why the slugs could use their abilities as well.

FM led me to a room with a slightly higher domed ceiling. Several humans with a variety of skin tones, all in shades of beige and brown, sat

around a large table. I wondered if those tones revealed their places of origin like with us, or if they were indicative of something else.

The woman I'd fled from—Jeshua Weight, FM had called her—glared at me. The meanings of facial expressions varied from species to species, and Finis had made me memorize many of them before I left for Starsight. But I was pretty sure that glare meant the same thing in every humanoid culture.

At the far end of the table sat the only other non-human in the room, a dione with blue skin. This would be Minister Cuna.

“Alanik of the UrDail,” they said. “Welcome.” They, like everyone in the room, had a translator pin perched on their shoulder. I hadn't had this many in my ship, so Cuna must have brought a large number as well. Jorgen offered one to me, and I pinned it on.

“Yes, welcome,” said a man in a white uniform. I remembered him vaguely now—he'd accompanied Jeshua the first time we spoke. “I am Admiral Cobb, and this is Minister Cuna.” Admiral Cobb had hair growing from the space below his nose—a big white bush of it. That had to be impractical when his nostrils cleared. Or maybe the bush existed to collect the contents. That was a disgusting thought.

I wasn't supposed to judge other cultures' practices—Finis said we had to be open-minded about the customs of other species if we wanted them to be open-minded about ours. I understood that in theory, but it didn't make it easy.

Admiral Cobb went around the room, introducing Jeshua Weight and several people who seemed to be her attendants, though I didn't understand the significance of their titles or manage to remember their names. Finis would have been disappointed. A good spy, she'd said, always paid attention to detail.

Unfortunately, I was distracted by Snuggles, who slipped off Jorgen's shoulders and onto the table, meandering over to Cobb.

“Is it necessary for those things to be here?” asked a man to Jeshua's right.

“Yes,” Cobb said. “The pilots have been instructed to carry their taynix with them at all times.”



“Could we at least get rid of that one?” the man asked, pointing at the red and black slug. “We all heard what it did.”

“Boomslug isn’t going to hurt anyone,” Jorgen said. “I’m working with him.”

“Perhaps the pilots could step outside then,” the man said. “Since this isn’t the place to discuss the taynix program.” He looked meaningfully at Jeshua. While I didn’t know enough about human expressions to deduce the full meaning, I could guess.

“I know that the taynix are hyperdrives,” I said.

Everyone in the room looked at me in alarm, including FM and Jorgen, though I wasn’t going to reveal that they’d given it away. “We UrDail are not as ignorant as the Superiority assumes.”

“Your species shows great promise,” Cuna said. “That’s why you were selected from among the lesser species to try out for our military exercise.”

I tried not to bristle at the term ‘lesser species.’ This wasn’t the time to split twigs.

“That military exercise showed up on our doorstep and tried to kill us,” Jeshua said. “So let’s not make it sound like such an honor to be invited.”

Ah, so the Superiority was gathering a military force to destroy the humans. That made sense. Perhaps it was a good thing then, that I’d avoided recruitment at Starsight. Now I knew the secret I’d meant to glean there, *and* I hadn’t made an enemy out of the humans.

Jeshua continued to glare at me.

*Most* of the humans anyway.

“Let’s get to the point,” Jeshua said. “Why have you returned, Alanik? What do you want?”

Cuna leaned back and their eyes widened—a dione gesture of discomfort, I thought. FM stepped back against the door where she still stood, while Jorgen tried unsuccessfully to get Snuggles to return to him.

I would have written Jeshua’s direct question off as human aggression, but it seemed not all the humans accepted it as normal.

Interesting.

“I returned because I think we can help each other,” I said. “The Superiority is also the enemy of my people.”

“The Superiority is not the enemy,” Cuna said quickly. “Winzik, the current leader of the Superiority military, has taken a hard line against the humans, but the Superiority itself is not a monolith. It is a sprawling amalgamation of diverse peoples and perspectives, none of which can be summarized with a single creed or—”

“Yes, as you’ve said,” Admiral Cobb cut in. “But whatever you want to call it, its military is trying to exterminate us. And that makes us enemies.”

“I think the more immediate question,” Jeshua said, “is what the UrDail have to offer us.”

I stood up straighter. Like FM, I had not been given a seat at the table. I didn’t know anything about human customs. Finis would want me to reserve judgment, to allow that perhaps in the human culture being left to stand was a gesture of respect.

But it obviously wasn’t. Any idiot could see that.

“I can teach your cytonics,” I said. “My skills are more developed, because I’ve had knowledge and training that your cytonics lack. If we were allies, we would share information with you. We have knowledge and experience with the Superiority that you don’t have here in isolation.”

I shot a look at Minister Cuna, who certainly had far more experience with the Superiority than I had, but they didn’t argue with me.

Besides, experience cooperating with the Superiority wasn’t the same as experience resisting.

Jeshua hesitated. They did need help with cytonics, and they knew it.

Admiral Cobb cleared his throat. “What exactly do you want in return?” he asked me. “An alliance between our governments?”

That wasn’t something I could officially offer, not with things the way they were. “An alliance between the humans of Detritus and the Independence faction of ReDawn,” I said. I might not have that authority either, but Rinakin did, and he’d sent me. “I need help to defend my people and to inspire others to fight. Once we’ve secured our military base, we

could formalize the alliance, build a plan to resist together. Your people and mine resisted together in the last war—”

“And we lost,” Jeshua said. “That’s how we ended up in this fix to begin with.”

I didn’t like the implication that the UrDail were at fault for that.

“We were allies for generations, not only in the last human war. And now my people are in trouble,” I said. Unity tried to suppress the history, but I’d read the books Rinakin had on the subject. “A rival faction is rounding up those who want to maintain independence from the Superiority, and they’re going to use us as leverage. If we first work together to rescue my allies, we can then build a coalition to fight back against the Superiority together.”

“So you’re asking for help,” Jeshua said. “Not offering help to us.”

“I think Alanik is saying that an alliance between your peoples would be mutually beneficial,” Cuna said. “And I concur. The UrDail are still somewhat aggressive, but if that aggression can be properly channeled—”

That was enough. “We aren’t aggressive,” I said. “We are *defending ourselves*, same as you are. And together we have more resources—”

“We are using all our resources to help ourselves,” Jeshua said.

“It seems like a good offer,” Cobb cut in. “If we share knowledge and resources, we’ll all be better positioned to fight back.”

“Maybe,” Jeshua said. “But if we align ourselves with rebels, we might lose the opportunity to bargain with the Superiority. They are the ones with the real power.”

FM and Jorgen both looked at me. The last time they’d talked about bargaining with the Superiority, I’d reacted poorly. That clearly had been the wrong tactic. Finis said a good spy was levelheaded, measuring her reactions.

“If you bargain with them,” I said, “you will always find that your wood returns to you rotten.”

“Regardless,” Jeshua said, mostly to Cobb, “We can’t send our starships away. We need them to defend Detritus.”

“The shield is defending us now,” Cobb said. “This might be the *best* time to send some of our ships away, to strike out instead of hunkering

down here and waiting for the Superiority to devise a new way to come at us.”

“This isn’t our decision,” Jeshua snapped. “An interplanetary alliance should be voted on by the National Assembly.”

“That depends,” Cobb said. “If it’s a military operation, then the DDF should make the call.”

I didn’t know enough about human politics to know who was correct, but I did know enough about politics in general to guess that everyone would interpret the law in the way that best suited themselves.

I reached out to Jorgen’s mind, hoping he wouldn’t react visibly. *Do you agree with them?* I asked him.

Jorgen stared at his unruly taynix, who was lying on the table just out of his reach, fluting softly.

*I don’t know,* Jorgen said. *It isn’t my call.*

*I know it isn’t your call,* I responded. *I’m asking what you think.*

*We don’t have a policy for this. There’s no precedent.*

That wasn’t an opinion either. Were these humans not even allowed to *think* for themselves? How had they managed to outlaw *that*?

“Perhaps you could offer Alanik some quarters while you discuss it,” Cuna said.

“Yes,” Jeshua said. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

I didn’t. “My people are in danger,” I said. “I don’t know how long they have before they’re turned over to the Superiority.”

Aside from FM and Jorgen, only Cobb looked sympathetic. The rest merely stared at me like my problems were none of their concern.

Still, my only choices were to wait them out or return home empty-handed, with nowhere to run and no way to help my brother, or Rinakin, or the rest of the resistance.

“But I would appreciate that,” I said, trying to sound like I meant it. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

If they took too long, I’d have to come up with another plan. I couldn’t leave my people in Unity’s hands for long.

But I couldn’t save any of my people on my own.

## Six

Because Cuna professed to be some sort of ambassador to “lesser species,” the humans allowed them to escort me to a low-ceilinged room with strange rectangular furniture. At home we carved our furniture from wood, and even basic inexpensive pieces would have designs carved into them. The more upscale furniture would be soaked and bent, the chair arms and headboards molded into swirling shapes. I stood in front of an armchair that consisted of a fabric cushion stretched over a metal frame, every piece forming a square angle.

I sat down on it. It was more comfortable than it looked, I would grant them that.

Cuna assured me that they would speak to the humans about my offer and then left me alone in the room. They weren’t gone more than a minute before there was a soft knock on the door. I could feel a congregation of cytonic resonances on the other side.

Jorgen and his slugs. “Come in,” I called, and Jorgen opened the door. FM stood on the other side with him, holding a basket of something green and flaky. They both stepped in and shut the door behind them.

“Cobb said we could bring you food,” FM said. “But we didn’t know what your people eat. Cuna said that algae wasn’t toxic for your people, so we brought some for you to try.” She pushed the basket into my hands. I knew what algae was, but I’d never thought to *eat* it. It grew beneath the surface bark sometimes, and could form in our atmospheric water generators if we weren’t careful to keep them clean. “Cuna also told us that you were more likely to eat fruits and tree nuts. We don’t have any nuts, and this was the only fruit we could find.” She shoved a small object into my hand. “Detritus isn’t the best place to grow things.” The fruit was red and roughly round and had a small brown stem at the top. It was much smaller

than the fruits that grew on the trees at home, more similar to one that might grow on a vine on one of the farming branches.

“Thank you,” I said. I moved over to a small table—also square, with straight-angled legs. The conference table had been the same. These humans were *very* fond of right angles.

“I’m sorry about my mother,” Jorgen said.

“Your mother?”

“Jeshua Weight. She’s...a lot to deal with sometimes. But she means well.”

FM looked like she wanted to argue, but she didn’t. At home it would be considered rude to comment on the failings of someone else’s family member unless one was specifically invited to. Possibly humans were the same.

There was another knock on the door, and Jorgen opened it. Three more humans stood there, each with a yellow taynix tucked into a sling across their chest. The humans all wore the same clothes—flight suits, with the same patch affixed to their shoulders. One was a woman with brown skin and long, curly hair that hung halfway down her back. It still surprised me that all of the humans had hair and skin in various shades of bark colors, like they’d been drawn in different tones with the same pencil.

All except the last man who walked in. His hair was a shade of red nearly as bright as the stripes on Boomslug, and it contrasted against his pale skin. I wondered if that color was natural, or if humans sometimes dyed their hair the way my people did.

“We heard Alanik was back,” said the girl with the curly hair. “We wanted to see for ourselves, and Cobb said it was okay as long as we didn’t help her escape.”

I hoped he said that in jest. “I don’t need anyone’s help escaping,” I said. “I’m here of my own free will.”

“Of course you are,” FM said. “This is Kimmalyn, Rig, and Arturo.”

The one she said was Arturo—a man with brown hair—stood by the door staring at me. The humans had done that less than I would have thought,

really. The only reason I could keep from staring at them was because there were so many of them.

This didn't feel rude though. More like he was sizing me up. I stared right back at him to let him know I was up to the challenge.

He seemed more puzzled by that than anything, so maybe I'd misread the situation.

Kimmalyn came over and sat down next to me. "Are they feeding you algae strips? They could at least have brought you some dessert."

"Cuna said the UrDail don't artificially sweeten their food," FM said.

Sweeten it? Most of the spices that grew on the vines were flavorful, but not particularly sweet. Which was good, because some of the fruits we grew were too sweet for my taste, especially when they were raw. "This is fine," I said. "Thank you." I lifted the fruit, testing the skin, which was thin and crisp.

"You can just bite into it," Kimmalyn said. "You don't need to peel it or anything. Unless your species doesn't like peel. We could bring you a knife —"

I bit into the fruit, which had a satisfying crunch to it, not unlike pitchfruit back home. It wasn't nearly as sweet though—it had more of a brisk flavor.

"Is it awful?" Kimmalyn asked.

"No, it's good," I said. "Thank you."

"You don't have to say that if you hate it," FM said. "We don't have a lot of fruit, but we can find you something else."

They were being kind, but I wasn't here to discuss culinary habits. If their politicians refused to help me, I could at least collect more information. "Why are people afraid of your taynix?" I asked Jorgen. "You called it Boomslug?"

"Yeah, he did," FM said, and Kimmalyn and Rig both snickered.

"Are we talking about that?" Rig asked. "She definitely doesn't have clearance."

"She already figured out about the hyperdrives," FM said.

"My apologies for announcing that in front of your superiors," I said.

“It’s okay,” Jorgen said. “Thank you for making it sound like you already knew.”

“But Boomslug—” I said. Boomslug seemed to recognize its name, because it descended Jorgen’s arm and slid across the table toward me.

“It exploded once,” Jorgen said. “Right in my face.” He rubbed one of the cuts on his cheek self-consciously.

I leaned away as it approached. “It *exploded*?”

“Watch out for your algae strips,” Kimmalyn said, and sure enough the slug began to sniff them speculatively.

“This explosion,” I said. “It was cytonic? Energy pushing out from it and slicing your face?”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “How did you...”

I stared at the slug in alarm. “That *taynix* can use mindblades?”

“What’s a mindblade?” Rig asked.

Mindblades were an advanced cytonic ability. If this creature could produce them, then it must be a powerful cytonic lifeform.

Though the idea that it could produce a mindblade when I couldn’t was frankly a little insulting.

“I’ve only seen them once,” I said. I could have kept this information to myself, but I didn’t see how they could use it against me—and giving it to them might make them feel comfortable giving more information to me. “Only one of the cytonics on ReDawn can produce them. They are...energy from the negative realm pulled into ours with fantastic force.” I watched the slug carefully as it gripped the edge of my algae strip with its mouth and slowly retracted the strip from the basket. “They are tremendously difficult to produce.”

FM smiled. “So Boomslug is an overachiever.”

“I would like to see it in action,” I said.

Jorgen scooted his chair away from me. “Not with us sitting right here.”

The slug slowly drew the algae into its mouth, watching quietly.

There *was* something ominous about it. Especially now that I knew what it did.



“Are there other types?” I asked. “Communication slugs? Inhibitor slugs, perhaps?”

“We have slugs that power hypercomms,” FM said. “So far we haven’t found a good use for those without a full hypercomm, so the pilots aren’t trying to bond to them. I don’t know about inhibitor slugs though.”

“Are inhibitors powered by a cytonic?” Jorgen asked.

“Power,” Boomslug said.

That was also unsettling. “Sometimes,” I said. “It takes a great deal of power, and generally cooperation between multiple cytonics to accomplish. But the Superiority has hyperdrives that work without a cytonic present. If they are using taynix to power their hyperdrives, perhaps there are inhibitor slugs as well.”

“If it takes multiple cytonics,” Rig said, “I wonder if it requires multiple taynix. We’ve only begun to learn what they can do when they work together.”

Boomslug continued to munch placidly on the algae strip. The idea of this thing collaborating was even more terrifying.

“What can you tell us about hyperjumping?” Rig asked. “Obviously you know how to do that.”

I hesitated. Jorgen and FM and their friends were sharing information with me. I wondered if this was the game—freely give up what they knew so that I would share what I knew with them.

“She’s not going to tell us anything yet,” Jorgen said. “That’s her bargaining chip. She wants help from the DDF in exchange for that information.”

“Oh,” Rig said. “Sorry.”

Apparently that wasn’t the game.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I would like to teach you what I know, if you’re willing to work with me.”

“I’d like to,” Jorgen said. “But it’s not our decision.”

“About that,” I said. “I asked you for your opinion earlier, but you never gave it to me.”

Jorgen sighed. “I don’t know who should make the decision about an alliance with your people. I think the assembly has a point when they say diplomacy is a political matter, not a military one. But the military has been making decisions for the assembly for so many years, it seems like a bit of a power grab for them to reverse course on that now.”

“It’s because of Cobb, I think,” Kimmalyyn said. “Some of the people on the assembly say he’s not fit to make these decisions.”

“Are they really saying that?” Rig asked.

“They are,” Arturo said. “The assembly has been in conflict with the DDF for years, wanting more say in operations. They were too afraid to take power from Ironsides when the war was so close to the surface, but now that the fighting is farther away, people aren’t as scared—even though our situation is worse. The assembly is starting to think about how to take power away from the DDF, trying to find other ways to deal with the Superiority, now that we know more about them.”

“Are all of your assembly dealings so public?” I asked.

“No,” FM said. “He knows because his girlfriend’s mother is a National Assembly Leader.”

Arturo suddenly looked uncomfortable, but he didn’t deny it. The pin translated “girlfriend” as “potential mate.” I wondered if humans got embarrassed discussing such pairings before they were finalized. Some did on ReDawn. It depended on what tree you were from.

“I went home to see my father a couple of days ago,” he said. “But neither of my parents would listen to me. They think I’ve been spending too much time with Cobb.”

“They do have a point about the Superiority,” FM said. “Finding other methods to deal with them seems like a good idea. It’s not healthy for us to think of everything that moves as a target to shoot at.” She looked at me like she already knew I would argue.

She wasn’t wrong. It must be tempting to think that way after years of fighting, but that was the same attitude that led my people right into the Superiority’s trap. The humans’ military had experience we on ReDawn could only read about in books. But it was useless without the will to fight.

If they fell for the Superiority's lies, then I couldn't rely on them to help pull ReDawn out.

"Some forces can't be reasoned with," I said. "They can only be opposed."

"The DDF would agree with you," Arturo said. "But the assembly is starting to think otherwise."

"Otherwise," his taynix said.

"Which is why I don't know who's right," Jorgen said. "You say we shouldn't talk to the Superiority, but I see the appeal. If we could strike an accord with them, lives could be saved."

"It depends on what you mean by saved," I said. "If you live, but give away your autonomy, your ability to make decisions for yourselves, to be treated as equals..."

"Do we have autonomy if all we can ever do is fight for our lives?" Arturo asked. "No one from the Superiority has ever treated us like equals. They treat us like insects."

"They're *afraid* of us," FM said. "And the assembly wants to convince them that they don't need to be, but the DDF keeps doing things that escalate the situation."

"Like turning on the shield," Rig said. "And developing hyperdrives. The better we get at defending ourselves, the more we convince them they'd better bring everything they have to destroy us."

"But if you don't do those things, they will enslave you," I said.

"Is that what it's like for your people?" FM asked. "You're slaves to the Superiority?"

I hesitated. There were so many on ReDawn who didn't see it that way. "No," I said. "Because we have maintained our autonomy. Instead of killing us, they isolated us, denying us hyperdrives and mostly leaving us alone."

The humans all stared at me.

"That must be nice," Kimmalyne said finally.

I looked down at the table. These people had been on the front lines, fighting people who wanted them dead. Our squabbles on ReDawn must look so easy to them by comparison. "I'm not trying to compare our

situations,” I said carefully. “But the Superiority keeps us all in cages of different kinds. They control us and call it peace, but it isn’t peace when we don’t have a choice.”

“That’s fair,” FM said, but none of the humans would quite meet my eyes. This all clearly weighed heavily on them.

I’d misjudged them, I realized. It wasn’t that the humans couldn’t think for themselves. It was that they had fought for so long with so few resources—but only for survival, not for any particular ideal.

They were desperate and confused, so they were striking around in the dark making confused, desperate decisions.

That was something I could offer them, I realized. Hope. A goal beyond mere survival.

“Our peoples were both autonomous once,” I said. “And Jeshua Weight is right. We lost that war together. But before that we worked together for *centuries*. Cytonics from my planet made contact with yours long before either of us were spacefaring. You inspired myths that we still treasure, and your people wrote about mine in their own mythology. One of your ancient writers even preserved bits of our language, so that when we began to travel across the universe, some of your people could speak to mine.” I’d never read the book, though now I wished I had. There were still a few copies on ReDawn. Something about a ring. “We don’t have to let the Superiority tell us we’re *lesser species*. We can return to our ancestors’ fight. We can pick up our old alliances. We can remind the Superiority why they were so afraid of us to begin with, and maybe this time we could *win*.”

“Or maybe we’d lose,” Kimmalyn said quietly.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said.

“If you’re losing now, would that outcome be so different?” I asked.

Before anyone could answer me the door opened, revealing Admiral Cobb in the hallway.

“Is this a social visit?” he asked to the room.

Jorgen startled. “No, sir. I mean, we brought Alanik some food, and we were talking, but—”

“At ease,” Cobb said, though he was the one who looked uneasy as he checked behind him in the hallway and then closed the door. He limped toward us, leaning on a cane.

“Any word from the assembly?” FM asked.

“Yes,” Cobb said. “They’ve granted permission for Alanik to remain on Detritus as a refugee.”

“I didn’t ask for that permission,” I said.

“I’m aware of that,” Cobb said. He scowled at Boomslug, who had started on a second of my algae strips. I hadn’t tried them yet, and I wondered if the humans would find that rude. I picked one up with my fingers. It was dry and crumbly, like some kind of wafer. Cobb focused on me, and I held the wafer still. “Jeshua has been conferring with NAL Algernon Weight and the rest of the assembly over the radio. Your petition for military aid has been denied—for the moment at least. The assembly is willing to continue debating the issue, and they say they’ll revisit it at a later time.”

“But I need help now,” I said. “My people are going to be given over to the Superiority—”

“So you said,” Cobb said. “They’re right that committing so many resources to your cause right now would weaken our position, especially after losing a flight’s worth of starships.”

FM and Jorgen exchanged guilty looks. I wanted to ask how they managed to lose multiple starships, but I’d lost two so far myself, so I supposed I couldn’t judge.

I should have asked that my ship be returned to me, I realized. That would have to be my next request. I stuck the end of the algae strip in my mouth, sampling it. It tasted like bittermoss, deep and earthy, with an even sharper aftertaste.

“It’s better dipped in custard,” Kimmalyn said. I didn’t know what custard was, so I would have to take her word for that.

“I think they’re also concerned that sending away starships would spoil their current negotiations,” Cobb said. “NAL Weight has been talking to one of the Superiority ministers, trying to negotiate a peace deal.”

I nearly spat out the algae strip. “They’ve made contact with the Superiority?”

“Using the hypercomm,” Cobb said. “And they want to have all of our resources available to bargain with.”

“They’re going to want your cytonics,” I said.

Jorgen’s eyes widened. “Is that true, sir?”

“I haven’t heard their exact demands,” Cobb said. “They’re trying to keep me out of the meetings, saying that this is a political discussion and not a military one.”

“But sir,” Jorgen said, “if they’re planning to bargain with military resources, doesn’t that concern the DDF?”

Cobb went on as if he hadn’t heard him. “I don’t imagine that the Superiority is going to be fond of us keeping our hyperdrives.”

FM’s hand went protectively to Gill in her sling.

“Our hyperdrives,” Gill said.

“We’re not handing the *taynix* over to the *Superiority*,” FM said.

Doing so would be incredibly foolish, but of course that was what the Superiority would demand. Perhaps the humans were closer to agreeing to help me than I’d thought. They did have resources they wanted to defend.

“I don’t think we should hand over a single hyperdrive to the Superiority,” Cobb said. “But right now my hands are tied.” He eyed me. “Tell me, would it be of any help to your people if we could send a single flight of ships?”

It would be far less help than an entire military fleet. But with one flight, I might be able to assault the ships that were holding my brother and the others from the resistance. I could rescue Rinakin. He was still respected by many, even though he’d lost the election. He might yet be able to sway others to our cause if we could show that we had human allies. “I would take any resources you could give me,” I said, “and make the best use of them that I could. My people want freedom. We’ve held out for it for so long, but my people have lost hope that they can grasp it. If we could begin to gain ground toward that goal, I believe others would join us.”

“What exactly would you do with them?” Cobb asked.

That was a very good question. “To start,” I said, “I would liberate the remaining outpost of my faction’s military. My people are being held on a Superiority ship and the base has been forcibly taken from us. If I could restore it to our control, the other Independence bases might feel empowered to fight back.”

Cobb nodded. “That’s good to know. Unfortunately, my hands are tied.”

I narrowed my eyes. Why ask if I could use a flight of ships if he had no intention of sending me one?

Cobb stood a bit straighter. “I’ve been specifically forbidden to order any starships to ReDawn to aid Alanik’s people. I can’t command Skyward Flight to go. I can’t command you to give Alanik the aid she needs in exchange for help learning how to use your cytonic abilities. I can’t order you to make an alliance with Alanik’s people, and I can’t order you to bring some of those resources home to help us here as soon as you can.”

FM and Rig exchanged a glance.

“We understand, sir,” Jorgen said, looking down at Boomslug morosely.

Cobb raised an eyebrow at him, like he didn’t understand at all.

I wasn’t an expert in human communication, but that seemed like an oddly specific list of things they were *not* being ordered to do. Cobb looked up at the ceiling and sighed, clearly disgruntled about something.

“You can’t order them to do it,” I repeated.

“Correct,” Cobb said. “I have been absolutely and expressly forbidden from ordering you to do what clearly and obviously needs to be done for the good of Detritus and her people.”

“That’s really unfortunate, sir,” Jorgen said. Cobb looked like he was ready to whack him with his cane.

FM smacked Jorgen in the arm with the back of her hand. “He’s saying he can’t *officially order* us to go,” she said.

“I heard him,” Jorgen said.

“Heard him!” Snuggles said.

“We’re all going to ReDawn,” FM said to Jorgen. “That’s what’s happening.”

Jorgen finally seemed to realize what was going on.

“Like the Saint says,” Kimmalyyn said, “whenever you get there, there you are.”

Jorgen looked up at Cobb for confirmation, and Cobb rolled his eyes. He gestured toward the door.

And then all the humans climbed to their feet. Jorgen scooped Boomslug off the table, half an algae strip still hanging from its mouth.

I paused in front of Admiral Cobb. “Thank you,” I said. I wasn’t going to call him sir. He wasn’t my commander. But he was the only reason I had hope for Rinakin and the rest of my people, so I owed him my respect.

“Don’t thank me,” Cobb said. “I’m just the bearer of bad news.”

I nodded to him, and then followed the others out of the room.



## Seven

We hurried down the corridor in the direction of their landing bay. “Is my ship in your hangar with the others?” I asked.

Rig fell back to walk briskly beside me, looking sheepish. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But we kind of...took it apart.”

“You *what?*”

“We were figuring out the differences between your engineering and ours,” he said. “I can put it back together, but it will take me time.”

“We don’t have time,” I snapped at him. I was sure my people would have done the same with a human ship, but that didn’t change the fact that I needed to get in the air *now*.

“We’ll set you up with one of our ships,” Rig said. “Some of the controls are different, but it’s the best we can do under the circumstances, unless you want one of the others to take a Dulo and you could ride copilot.”

“No,” I said. The idea of being at the mercy of one of the humans as we returned to ReDawn was stifling. I could steal a ship there of course, but I’d rather come in with my own set of wings. “Give me one of your ships. I’ll...figure it out.”

“You should take a comms slug with you,” Rig said to Jorgen. “In case you need one to contact us.”

“Good idea,” Jorgen said. “Snuggles, take me to Fine.”

“Fine!” Snuggles said, and Jorgen disappeared, and then reappeared a moment later next to FM with a purple and orange slug tucked under his arm.

“Fine!” Snuggles said again.

“Good job, Snuggles,” FM said, and she withdrew a tin from her pocket and offered it a pinch of some sticky substance.

Interesting.

“Are you coming with us?” FM asked Rig over her shoulder. “Because if not, you should get back to Engineering. You don’t want to be associated with what we’re about to do.”

Rig hesitated. “I think I should stay here, but...”

He didn’t seem happy about it, possibly because his friends were all running off into danger and he didn’t know when they would be back.

“It’s okay,” FM said. “If we need you, we know where to find you.”

“Yeah,” Rig said. “I won’t be able to say the same for you.”

FM looked like she was about to say more, but she glanced at the others and stayed silent. Rig gave her a sad wave and then turned to go. She watched after him over her shoulder, though I couldn’t read the expression on her face.

There was clearly a subtext I was missing there. I’d have to ask her about it later, when we weren’t about to steal a flight of starships.

I followed Jorgen out a side door and along a narrow path between buildings to the landing bay. Jorgen breezed past two humans who were working on one of the control panels of a partially disassembled ship.

“We’re on orders to take our ships up immediately,” he said. “Sorry for the late notice.”

One of the ground crew followed on his heels, staring at me in alarm. “Didn’t you hear?” she said. “There’s a mandatory muster—you’re all expected to be in your quarters for a surprise inspection.”

Jorgen looked relieved. Cobb had obviously done that to cover our tracks, and possibly so he could claim later that we’d used the muster as cover without his knowledge.

“These orders supersede those,” Jorgen said.

“We weren’t notified,” she said. “We can start working through the preflight checks—”

“No time,” Jorgen said. “We’ll do it ourselves. You can radio to Admiral Cobb directly. He’ll authorize it.”

Or fail to answer his radio, more likely, to maintain deniability.

“Alanik is going to take one of the spare Skyward ships,” FM said.

“There aren’t any spare Skyward ships,” the ground crew member said. “We’ve only now got *any* Skyward ships again, and we’re definitely not authorized to put an alien in—”

“Do you want to be responsible for us being delayed?” Jorgen asked.

“I am responsible for getting you in the air, and I can’t do that without —”

“The shield is going to fail,” FM cut in. “There’s some debris on a trajectory to destroy the controls, and if we don’t get up there and shoot it down, the sky is going to be open to the Superiority again. Do you want to be responsible for that?”

The ground crew person hesitated, and Jorgen shot FM a grateful look.

“Come on,” FM said to me. “We’ll get you into a ship.”

On the way across the landing bay we passed my own ship parked among a few with obvious damage. It was similar in design to the human ships, but made from darker metal. It didn’t *look* disassembled from the outside, but when I peered through the canopy, I found that they’d taken *everything* apart. My instruments were in pieces, the navigation module disassembled and left on the seat.

“Not flying that today,” FM said. “Rig can fix it for you later. Come on.”

I wasn’t sure whose ship she brought me to, and when I climbed into the cockpit I had even less idea what I was looking at. The instrumentation was all arranged differently.

“Can you fly it?” FM asked.

“I can hyperjump with it,” I said. “Flying might be a bit more of a challenge.”

FM pointed out some of the more vital systems, and I began to acclimate myself. I found the eject lever on the side of the seat, in the same location as ours. Not everything was different from our starships. “These are the radio controls,” FM said, flipping a toggle and spinning a dial. She handed me a helmet. “I’ll set you to the flight channel. Remember what you say over the radio isn’t secure. I’m going to get myself in the air, but if you have any questions...”

I had a lot of questions, but that ground crew tech was probably trying to reach Admiral Cobb right now. Through the canopy I saw Kimmalyn running across the landing bay with three men following her. Trailing after them was a short girl with blue hair.

“We’re all here,” Jorgen said over the radio. “Skyward Flight, let’s get in the air. Go!”

I scanned the ship controls, trying to remember what FM had told me. I found the lever to engage the acclivity ring—those controls weren’t very different from my ship. The throttle lever and the control sphere were the same, though the one in my ship was smaller, and this one felt unwieldy in my hand.

I made sure to remember the location of the button for the destructors—I didn’t want to set those off by mistake. I engaged my acclivity ring and rose in the air, and managed—mostly accidentally—to remember which were the dive controls as my ship pitched forward, nose pointed at the ground.

“You okay, Alanik?” FM asked.

“Fine,” I said, righting myself. I *could* fly. I only *looked* like I couldn’t.

I piloted the ship out of the landing bay and then climbed in altitude until I pulled even with Jorgen. One by one, the ships in Skyward Flight followed us into the air.

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said over the radio. “Sound off when ready. Alanik, we’re going to make you Skyward Eight for the moment. You’ll need a callsign eventually, if you don’t have one.”

What was a callsign?

Then Jorgen called out, “Skyward One, callsign Jerkface,”

Jerkface? My pin translated that to something akin to “rude visage,” which didn’t seem like a nice thing to call anyone.

The rest of the flight sounded off, and I recognized a few of their voices, though many of them used different names. Kimmalyn was “Quirk,” I thought, and FM was still FM. I didn’t think I’d met Nedder yet, and I had no idea which of the men I’d seen were Catnip, T-Stall, or Amphisbaena, though I thought that last one might be Arturo, and the girl with the blue hair must be Sentry. My pin didn’t even offer a translation for some of

them. I didn't fully understand the purpose of the callsigns—perhaps to conceal their identities from the enemy?—but this wasn't the time to ask.

“Skyward Flight,” Jeshua Weight's voice said over the radio.

“All ships converge above the landing platform,” Jorgen said, ignoring her. “Alanik, we can't use the hyperdrives to reach your planet. Are you prepared to hyperjump?”

“Yes,” I said. “But I can't bring you all unless our ships are touching.”

“We're going to interlock using light-lances,” Jorgen said. “We've tried other things, but that's the fastest way. We'll attach to you, so you don't have to worry about the controls.”

Kimmalyn's ship drew nearer to mine, and then a line of light, similar to our light hooks, beamed out from her ship, connecting it to mine.

“Skyward Flight,” Jeshua tried again. “You are grounded. Land your ships immediately or you will face court-martial.”

The others began to converge around me, moving closer than I was comfortable with as they connected their ships to mine. I tried to adjust my position by manipulating my control sphere, but it was more sensitive than I was used to, and I ended up jogging unintentionally to the side.

“Jorgen!” Jeshua said, shouting into the radio now. “Ground those ships!”

“Sorry, Mom,” Jorgen said. He did sound sorry, and more than a little stressed out.

“Um, Jerkface?” Nedder said over the radio. “They're readying ships. You don't think they're going to shoot at us, do you?”

“If you leave to fight for the UrDail without permission you are defecting,” Jeshua said. “Ground your ships immediately.”

“Scud,” Nedder said. “Do you think she'll do it?”

“I don't know,” Jorgen said. “Let's get out of here before we find out.”

“I'm ready when you are,” I told him, and reached into the negative realm, feeling across the abyss toward ReDawn. I reached for Hollow, sensing its familiar branches hanging there, a solid point on the other side of all that nothingness.

“Jerkface,” Arturo said. “Stardragon Flight is starting to launch.”

“This is Robin from Stardragon Flight,” an uncertain voice said over the radio. “Awaiting orders.”

“Where is Admiral Cobb?” Jeshua said.

“She can’t tell them to shoot,” Arturo said. “She doesn’t have the authority.”

I wondered if that was the only thing stopping her; if she’d really give the order to shoot down her own son.

Jorgen didn’t respond. I peered past Kimmalyn’s ship to Jorgen’s. I could see Boomslug perched on his shoulders, though I couldn’t see his face, shadowed as it was by his helmet.

“Alanik, we are a go to hyperjump,” Jorgen said.

“Jerkface?” Robin said again. “What are you—”

I reached across the negative realm to Hollow, and I *pulled*.

## Eight

I'd never dragged so much mass through the negative realm before, but I was met with no more resistance. We cut through easily, like a knife through whipped whiteberry jam. For a moment we all hung suspended, the eyes staring down at us. A force, massively big and wide, reached for us like it wanted to smother us all. I felt Jorgen and the many slugs around me, all staring up at them. I could feel fear from the slugs, and something else from Jorgen—shame perhaps?

And then the eyes disappeared, and we hung in the miasma in sight of Hollow. We were still on the day side of the planet, the sky bright. I immediately checked our proximity to Wandering Leaf to ensure we hadn't emerged in range of the autoturrets. The platform was a shadow floating off to our right, not close enough to fire. Hollow's corpse reached upward toward the sky, a hazy outline against the miasma.

"Saints and stars," Kimmalyn said. "Does that thing eat people?"

"The tree?" I asked. "No, it doesn't eat people. Have you never seen a tree before?"

"I've seen a tree," Arturo said. "It wasn't much taller than Nedder."

"These can grow up to fifty kilometers tall," I said. "They float in the miasma, and our cities are built on them."

"Scud, that's creepy," Nedder said.

"And beautiful," Kimmalyn added.

"What is all this in the air?" Arturo asked.

"Gases," I said. "Most of the trees have clear patches of air around them, but Hollow has fewer because the tree itself no longer produces oxygen. There's still a bubble of breathable atmosphere from the plants that grow here and from the atmospheric generators installed by the lumber corps, but it's much thinner and we'll have to be more careful."

I scanned the area quickly with my cytonic senses, but I couldn't find any cytonics besides us.

"I'm seeing a ship on my long-range sensors," Jorgen said. "Looks like a transport ship. Is that our target?"

"Yes," I said. I found the controls to expand my own sensors and took a look. I'd brought us in on the far side of the tree, about a five-minute flight out, not sure if the holding ship would even still be here. It had been a few hours, and they could have taken them somewhere else by now.

But the ship was still hovering outside the base. Either they'd subdued the people inside, or my people were too afraid to fight.

We were going to show them how it was done. The Unity fighters wouldn't be expecting us, so even if they'd seen us arrive, we should have a few minutes to prepare while they readied their starships.

"There are civilians still living on the tree," I said. "Some small settlements, plus the lumber mining facilities. I don't want to fire on those or on the transport ship. My people are being held there, and we're going to need them to join the fight."

"Understood," Jorgen said. "What can you tell us about the ship?"

"Not a lot," I said. "It's a small Superiority transport. It's not a fighter, but it has a cytonic inhibitor, so I can't jump in and get people out. The last ship like that I ran across was manned by diones but piloted by an UrDail cytonic. This time there're no cytonics here but us, unless they're in the hold of that ship."

"Do you know if they have a hyperdrive?" Jorgen asked.

"I doubt it," I said. "They'd never give us that technology, for fear we'd figure out the secret."

"That sounds about right," FM said.

"If they can't hyperjump," Jorgen said, "then we can put pressure on them, try to get them to land. Do you know how many fighters we'll be facing here?"

"No," I said. "However many starships were stationed here, plus the number of fighters Unity brought with them when they took the base. They might not have enough pilots to fill all the Independence ships though."



“All right,” Jorgen said. “Our primary objective is to get the transport ship to land and free the imprisoned UrDail inside. Secondary objective is to retake the base. Skyward Flight, detach and move toward the...tree thing.”

“Its name is Hollow,” I said.

“Scud,” Sentry said. “Even its name is spooky.”

All around me, light beams retracted as the flight let each other go. I didn’t see any Unity fighters moving toward us yet.

“Alanik, there should be a button flashing on your radio panel,” Jorgen said. “Press it?”

I did so, and his voice continued over the radio.

“This is a private channel,” Jorgen said. “The rest of the flight can’t hear us. Do you see the dial to switch from channel to channel? You might want to note mine so you know how to reach me specifically if there’s something you need to report that you don’t want everyone to hear.”

“If I have something I need to report,” I said, “I could speak it into your mind.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Jorgen said. “I need to work on that. I can do it with the slugs, and it probably works the same? I also need you to show me how to hyperjump without a taynix.”

“You might not be able to,” I told him. “Not all cytonics can.”

“Do we have different abilities?” he asked. “Like the taynix?”

“Not exactly. More like strengths and weaknesses. And some cytonics are stronger than others.”

“Figures,” Jorgen said. “If it’s possible for Spensa to show me up at something, she always will.”

He didn’t sound bitter about that. I was no master of human intonation, but to me he sounded more sad than anything.

“Where is Spensa?” I asked. “You said she was gone again. Was she taken by the Superiority?”

“No,” Jorgen said. “She’s lost, somewhere in the nowhere. The...place you pass through when you hyperjump. The place with the eyes.”

“The negative realm,” I said. “What do you mean, she’s *lost* there?”

“She went there to escape the Superiority,” Jorgen said. “And she hasn’t been able to find a way out.”

“The negative realm isn’t a place you go,” I said. “It’s a place you...slip through. You can’t *remain* there.” At least you couldn’t as far as I knew.

“Yes, well. You don’t know Spensa. She does a lot of things that ought to be impossible.”

She seemed like a good person to have on your side, though less so if she disappeared.

“Did you want to pick a callsign?” Jorgen said. “We don’t usually use our real names over the radio, but I don’t know if your people have the same custom.”

“We don’t,” I said. “And I wouldn’t know what to call myself.”

“If you ask the flight, you’ll get lots of suggestions. But you might not like them.”

“Why do they call you Jerkface?” I asked. “Is it because of the wounds on your face?”

“No, unfortunately.”

“Are you unattractive by human standards?”

“What? No!” Jorgen stuttered a bit. “You think I’m *ugly*? It’s not about my face. Jerkface means, like, a jerk. A rude person.”

“Oh,” I said. “So you are disliked, then.”

“I am *not* disliked! Or, I was. By Spensa. Anyway, it’s a long story.”

I could have stopped trying to figure this out, but I was too amused by Jorgen’s defensiveness. “So you and Spensa are enemies then. Because she is always showing you up.”

“Um, no,” Jorgen said. “We’re not enemies. Not anymore. We never really were. It’s...complicated. Oh, look! The flight is trying to reach us on the general line.”

The button for the private channel stopped flashing as Jorgen’s voice went quiet.

We started flying toward Hollow. My ship moved haltingly as I figured out how much pressure to apply to the boosters, but by the time we neared the tree I was starting to fly more smoothly.

As we drew closer, the transport ship moved away from the base. The pilot had spotted us, because a flight of Unity ships was now headed our way.

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said. “Engage those ships. T-Stall, Catnip, FM, and Sentry, keep the fighters occupied while the rest of us cut through to the transport ship.”

“Copy that,” FM said. We accelerated toward the enemy ships. There were ten of them in total, so we were nearly evenly matched in number. As we approached, Skyward Flight opened fire, forcing the Unity ships to break formation or risk losing their shields.

We used similar techniques when we drilled against each other, but we used lasers, not destructor fire. In this battle there were no tag outs, no warnings. The humans weren’t playing a game.

Neither was the Superiority, and it was about time my people caught up to speed.

“Alanik,” Jorgen said. “You don’t have a wingmate, so you can stick with me and Quirk.”

As the enemy ships broke formation, two pairs of human ships darted after them, chasing them in circles. I smiled. The Unity fighters must be terrified.

Arturo and Nedder took off through the gap left by the broken enemy formation, and Jorgen and Kimmalyyn followed. I stayed close to them—none of these Unity fighters were cytonic, and since I was in a human ship they hadn’t figured out which one I was in. They wouldn’t be able to see through the canopies unless their ships got very close, and even then it would be difficult to discern faces beneath helmets.

I scanned for hypercomm signals and didn’t find any, though I might have missed Unity’s call to Quilan, or they might have done so over the ordinary radio. They were probably wondering where I managed to get a full flight of unfamiliar ships within a couple of hours, and that confusion could only be to our advantage.

We accelerated, tearing through the miasma toward Hollow. The silhouette became clearer against the crimson sky. Destructor fire followed

from behind me.

I banked to the side, executing a swivel-turn, and opened fire on the two ships targeting me.

“Amphi, Nedder,” Jorgen said. “Alanik’s got some tails. Give her some support while Quirk and I push through.”

“On it,” Arturo said, before I could even tell them I didn’t need help.

Nedder shot past me, drawing the enemy fire, while Arturo did a swivel-turn of his own, pivoting to catch the ships in the crossfire. One of them executed a banking roll and fled in the direction of Jorgen and Kimmalyn, while the other lost its shield and took a direct hit in the left wing. The pilot ejected, a parachute opening and slowing their descent. Their helmets and flightsuits would allow them to survive in the miasma. The pilot would put out a distress beacon as they descended toward the core, and would probably be picked up before they reached it—and if not, shortly after.

We all turned, moving toward Jorgen and Kimmalyn, though Nedder and Arturo beat me to the ship that was chasing them, making quick work of it before I could even get off a shot.

I was going to have to step up my game if I wanted to keep up with them. I didn’t appreciate being treated like a novice. *I can handle two ships*, I said to Jorgen. *Just because I don’t have combat experience doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m doing.*

*I didn’t mean to insult you*, Jorgen responded. *I would have done the same for any one of us.*

Really? They *all* felt like they needed to buddy up just to take down a couple of ships? Yes, I knew what we were doing was a lot more dangerous than the games, but for supposedly hardened warriors...it seemed so... spineless.

Nedder and Arturo shot out in front of Jorgen and Kimmalyn and then slowed, taking point again. Jorgen didn’t say a word about it. Rather, he let them ride out in front of him like he *wanted* them there.

The others must have been doing a good job chasing off the other ships. We were nearing the tree now, passing by the thickest branch of Hollow and

into the thin bubble of clear atmosphere. A few small towers wound around the edge of the branch.

The transport ship wasn't going to get away. Even if we hadn't had the ability to hyperjump, it wasn't designed to move at fighter speeds in atmosphere. It seemed to have realized that, because it had stopped moving away from the tree and was now headed toward it, quickly disappearing from view.

"Alanik," Jorgen said. "The ship we're after disappeared into the tree. Is there a hangar down there you're aware of?"

"No," I said. "The base with the hangar is in the upper branches. But they call it Hollow for a reason."

"Okay," Jorgen said. "Let's follow that ship. Alanik, since you know the terrain, take point."

It was a good plan, though I wished taking point didn't put me out in front when I was struggling with my ship's controls. Thankfully I had the maneuvering down, so I didn't look like an idiot as I led them around the thick trunk of Hollow and down toward the chasm in the crook of the tree branches.

"FM," Jorgen said over the radio. "Sitrep?"

"We've got them running," FM said. "They're headed in your direction though."

"Took 'em long enough to catch on," Nedder said.

"They had to know why we were here, didn't they?" Arturo asked.

"They did," I said. I remembered what Rinakin said. Just because they understood our tactics didn't mean they wouldn't work.

I flew my ship through the gaping mouth of Hollow and into the depths of its trunk. It was dark in here, though daylight did shine in patches through knotholes in the sides of the trunk, some of which were as much as a kilometer wide. Spindly buildings stretched up the inside, carved and constructed against the interior of the tree. Lumber mining facilities, cutting out the dead wood to be shipped to other parts of the planet. The chasm went deep down into the trunk, partially formed by the natural rotting of the dead tree and then expedited by mining.

We spotted the transport ship heading toward the mining facilities at the bottom of the chasm. “We’ve got limited time before those ships arrive,” Jorgen said. “Alanik, plan for forcing the ship to land?”

“You can’t shoot it down,” I said. “And they’re not going to land willingly. Do you have light nets?”

“We have light-lances,” Jorgen said. “We can use them to grab the ship, but we wouldn’t be able to drag a ship that big without taking out its boosters first.”

“Will it be cornered down there?” Arturo asked.

“No,” I said. “There are exits near the lumberyard for exports.”

“It’s bigger than a fighter, isn’t it?” Kimmalyn asked. “Could we take out the boosters without hurting the prisoners?”

“I doubt it,” I said. “The boosters are right below the hold. My people are practically on top of them.”

“Let’s get closer,” Jorgen said. “Quirk can take a look, see what she thinks.”

We approached the transport ship. UrDail transport ships weren’t equipped with weapons, but this Superiority ship had a shield and some basic destructors.

And they said we were too aggressive.

“Boosters are no-go, Jerkface,” Kimmalyn said. “No way I can hit those without damaging the hull. Cockpit is possible though. I’m guessing the pilots aren’t our friends?”

“Not friends,” I said. “But you can’t shoot out the cockpit without hurting my people in the hold...can you?”

“Quirk?” Jorgen said.

“I think I can get it,” Kimmalyn said.

“Be sure,” Jorgen said.

“Ummmm.”

Below us, the transport ship was moving across the top of the lumberyard buildings. It was a medium-sized craft, designed to move maybe thirty people. If they had fit everyone from the base inside, they’d be packed in tight.

The transport ship cruised toward the exit shaft. They probably guessed we were here to rescue their captives, and that we weren't willing to shoot the ship down.

They guessed right, on my part at least.

"We'll have to get the shield first," Jorgen said. "Nedder, go in close, get it with your IMP. Alanik and Amphi, ping them with your light-lances."

"Where is that, exactly?" I asked. FM had told me, but I couldn't remember. It wasn't in the same location as my light hook.

"The buttons on the sides of your control sphere," Jorgen said.

I found them. "Got it. I didn't hear Quirk say she was sure she could do this."

"Um, Jerkface?" FM broke in. "We can't figure out how to get to you."

"We're inside the tree," Jorgen said. "Entrance is where the branches meet the trunk."

I still couldn't tell several of the humans apart, especially when they all started to chatter together.

"Say again, Jerkface? Did you say you're *inside* the tree?"

"What's the matter, Sentry? Never flown a ship inside a tree before?"

"Shut it, T-Stall."

"We're on our way, Jerkface," FM said, "but you have incoming."

"We need to do this now. Quirk?"

"I can do it," she said. "I want to have to use only one shot, but I can do it."

"Nedder," Jorgen said, "catch that ship before it leaves the tree."

"Jerkface?" Arturo said. "If we chase it outside, we'd have more space to catch it in an uncontrolled descent before it hit the ground."

"Are you talking about *chasing* that ship full of *my people* down toward the core?" I asked.

"Um, maybe?" Arturo said.

"In here is better," Jorgen said. "We have incoming. Nedder, get it done."

"Copy," Nedder said, and he dove toward the ship as it headed into the mouth of the shaft that would lead out of the tree. When he got close, he hit his IMP, dropping the ship's shields.

Arturo dove directly behind him, and I jerked my ship to the side in my attempt to keep up. I wished I had my own ship—I looked like an idiot in this thing, which wasn't going to help them think of me as a capable member of the team.

“Scud,” Jorgen said. “Enemy ships, on top and closing. Nedder, help me hold them off.” I focused on following Arturo as we neared the transport ship.

Kimmalyn's ship darted over our heads. She had to get ahead of the transport ship to get a clear shot. The transport ship aimed its destructors at her and fired, but she dodged and turned her ship around to face it.

“Ready,” she said.

“All right, Quirk,” Arturo said. “On my mark.” He soared over the transport ship and shot it with his light-lance. I aimed and fired as well, grabbing the ship by the other side.

“Scud,” Nedder said. “They're coming in hot.”

“Fire!” Arturo said.

Kimmalyn's destructors fired, and the cockpit of the transport ship exploded in a shower of sparks.



## Nine

“Quirk!” Jorgen shouted over the radio. “Report?”

“Successful, I think?” Kimmalyn said. “Cockpit annihilated. Hull is intact.”

That was a seriously impressive shot. Kimmalyn would have been a star, even in the professional leagues.

“Alanik? How’s the inhibitor?”

I scanned the area through the negative realm. The hull was a giant blank space. “Operational,” I said. I held one half of the ship by my light-lance and Arturo had the other. The ship’s acclivity ring also seemed to be operational, so we didn’t have to adjust our boosters to keep it in the air. Without the cockpit controls, I didn’t know how much longer that would last.

“What about the pilot?” I asked.

“Um, dead?” Kimmalyn said. “Copilot, too, if there was one.”

I blinked down at the ship. I didn’t have a clear view of the cockpit from this angle, but—

“Well done, Quirk,” Jorgen said, like it was nothing.

She’d just *killed* people, and they thought of it as *nothing*.

I shook myself. What did I think was going to happen in an actual military firefight?

“We’re here to help,” FM said, and I looked up through my canopy to see the rest of the flight descending on the remaining ships. They seemed to have it handled for now, and the light-lance would be sufficient to hyperjump us all.

“We need to jump this ship to the base,” I said. “Where the pilots can board Independence ships and help us.”

“You can take them anytime, Alanik,” Jorgen said.

I didn't need his permission, but at least we agreed on what had to be done.

"That base will be crawling with the enemy, won't it?" Arturo asked.

"Probably," I said. "Drop your line if you don't want to come with me."

I gave Arturo a few seconds to decide. With the ship's acclivity ring still functional, I didn't need him to hold the ship, but I could use the backup when we arrived. When he didn't release, I reached through the negative realm up to the airspace in front of the Independence base and pulled us all through.

The eyes were wrathful as we passed beneath them, but no more than last time. Hopefully it had been long enough since my last jump that I wasn't putting us all at too much risk. Especially because I wasn't confident that I was going to get out of this battle without needing to hyperjump again.

"Alanik," Arturo said over the radio, "confirm, personnel in that hangar are the enemy, correct?"

I had to turn my ship to the side to see what he was referring to. There were Unity soldiers inside the hangar, some staring in confusion, others running for cover.

"Affirmative," I said.

"Copy," Arturo said. He opened fire as we approached the hangar, and the remaining Unity people began to flee.

"Do we need to secure the area?" Arturo asked.

"My people can do it," I said. At least, I hoped they would do a better job of it than they did the first time. We flew into the hangar and deposited the transport on the ground, our ships still hovering above it. My people poured out, including my brother, Gilaf, who turned around and stared up at us. There weren't more than fifty of them—I wondered if some of the Independence people had defected to Unity.

I pulled off my helmet and waved at Gilaf. He waved back and joined a group of Independence pilots already heading to the remaining ships. They'd get in the air and join the fight, putting us ahead in numbers.

For now.

I searched again for hypercomm signals. Far out in the miasma, I heard the buzz of a communication.

*—at Hollow. Bring her in alive—other cytonic interference—not sure what to expect—*

I smiled. Quilan could sense Jorgen and the slugs, same as I could. A group of humans with hyperdrives would be low on his list of possible explanations.

“More enemy incoming,” I said over the radio.

“Do we know how many ships?” Arturo asked.

“No idea,” I said. “Depends on how many Quilan can muster in a hurry.” And how much of a threat he thought I was.

Ships couldn’t move as fast through the miasma as they could in the vacuum because of the air resistance. Quilan would probably head straight up out of the atmosphere and then skirt the planet in the vacuum. He’d call up units as close to us as possible—which meant they could be here long before he was.

I widened my sensors, searching for the incoming ships. They were coming through the miasma on the duskward side of Hollow. They’d pass by Skyward Flight before they got to us. “They’re coming up fast. Duskward side.”

“What’s that?” Jorgen asked.

Oh. “The side where the sun sets. On the...”

The enemy split into two groups as the ships approached the tree.

“We use time on a clock,” he said. “Like, directly behind me is six o’clock, straight ahead is twelve...”

I had vaguely heard of this—an old-fashioned way of telling directions, probably from the days when we were allied with the humans. “We don’t use that notation anymore. Here.” I sent the direction to his mind so he could see what I meant.

“Scud,” Jorgen said. “I see them on our sensors now. They *are* coming up fast. Looks like about twenty of them.”

“The pilots we rescued are getting in their ships now,” I said, “so we’ll have backup.”

The remaining Unity soldiers seemed unwilling to step into the hangar to be shot by our destructors, which had given the Independence pilots plenty of time to get in their ships. Arturo and I could now go back and help the flight without risking that my people would be overrun.

“We’re on our way back to you,” I said to Jorgen. “Maybe we can make a stand inside the tree and keep the enemy ships occupied.”

“Affirmative,” Jorgen said. “But if things get too hot or they try to skirt us, we’ll implement bounce protocol.”

I didn’t know what that was, but I had to trust they would handle themselves. I found the Independence radio channel and broadcast to the ships. “Independence pilots. Allies are fighting Unity forces near the lumber mine operations. Hold the base, and we’ll be back to support you as soon as we can.”

“Alanik,” my brother said over the radio. “Who are your allies?”

I wasn’t going to announce that over the radio. “I’ll explain later.” I flipped to Skyward Flight’s channel and followed Arturo as he turned his ship toward the entrance at the base of the branches.

Quilan’s reinforcements beat us there. I could see half their flight entering the shaft that led to the lumber mine, while the others flew into the larger upper opening ahead of us. They’d split up to come at Jorgen and the others from both sides. Arturo opened fire as we chased them in, and some of the ships flipped around, returning fire.

“You’ve got company down below,” Arturo said over the radio. “We’re keeping them busy up top.”

“Copy, Amphi,” Jorgen said. “Flight, star formation. Crossfire positions. FM, Sentry, cover our six.”

Jorgen had said six was behind him, hadn’t he? I was glad that if he was using that terminology, it wasn’t addressed to me. I dodged fire from an incoming ship as Arturo and I sped past, leaving them to follow us down into the depths of the tree.

We approached Skyward’s formation from above, firing at the ships that had them pinned down near the bottom of the tree. The ship I targeted lost its shield, and I pegged it with a destructor blast right in its boosters. The

pilot ejected, joining several other pilots drifting down into the mining facilities while their ships crashed into the wooden wall on the downward side.

Skyward Flight flew in a loose sphere with Jorgen and Kimmalyn at the center, all with their acclivity rings rotated to point their noses upward at different angles. They filled the air with destructor blasts, each line of fire crossing over another. This formation was similar to one I'd learned in training, though we used laser guns. If you had an obstacle at your back and enough ships clustered together, any enemy that tried to get through to you risked getting tagged in your crossing lines of fire.

Arturo took up position next to Nedder, and I dodged past the ships between us, flying through to join Kimmalyn and Jorgen at the center.

"What are you doing?" I asked Jorgen over the radio. "You're the leader. Shouldn't you be out front?"

"What?" Jorgen said. "No. If I'm out front I can't watch and give orders. And if I'm in trouble, who's going to make sure the rest of the flight is safe?"

Safe? "But you're not getting any of the action," I said. "How are you going to prove yourself?"

"*Prove myself?*" Jorgen said.

"Quirk, incoming!" FM said. Kimmalyn pivoted her ship to point down, opening fire. It took me a second longer to get my ship turned the right way, and then I joined them.

Kimmalyn especially was a good shot—she got several blows to the enemy shields before they peeled off to the sides and swung around again.

Two more ships broke past FM and Sentry below us. These got close enough that they deployed their light hooks—two from each ship, the streams crossing each other to form a kind of net. They pulled apart, trying to fly alongside Kimmalyn to capture her ship, but she rolled to the side, avoiding the trap. "Scud! What is that?"

"Light nets," I said. "It's a capture tactic. Their orders are to bring us in alive." Or me anyway, now that Quilan knew I was here. Though if these pilots got close enough to recognize the humans under their flight helmets,

their commander would quickly realize having humans to turn over to the Superiority could only work in Unity's favor.

Not that I was going to let that happen.

The ships turned their nets toward Jorgen, and I fired at one with my destructors. The pilot tried to maintain the net a moment too long, and I landed enough hits to take down the shield. The ship turned, breaking the net, but Kimmalyn got the final shot and the ship went into an uncontrolled spin. The pilot ejected, and instead of flying off to the side like the others, the ship spiraled into one of the mining buildings below.

At least there wouldn't be many people living in here, though there would be some civilians present. I hoped they'd taken cover when the fighting began.

"Jerkface," FM said, "we have incoming."

She was right. My sensors identified a whole fleet of air force ships, many more than we'd been chasing around this tree, and all of them would be equipped with light nets. They were still a few minutes out, but they were coming for us.

"We can't fight all those," Jorgen said. "How defensible is the base? Does it have ground support?"

"Like guns?" I asked. "No. It's never been attacked, not in almost a century. Maybe not even then."

"Scud," Jorgen said. "We need to get out of here. Skyward Flight, bounce protocol. Fall back to the base. We're not leaving without Alanik's people."

Leaving? We were supposed to take and hold the base. If we left now, how would we inspire the rest of the Independence air force to fight?

I could see the incoming ships on my sensor screen though. There *were* too many of them. We wouldn't be able to hold the base against so many, even if they didn't have a cytonic with them.

FM and Sentry immediately disappeared, though I saw them reappear outside the tree through one of the knot holes. They'd used their hyperdrives to escape. The Unity pilots clearly weren't expecting this, and I

could hear snatches of confused exclamations over the radio through the negative realm.

“Alanik,” Jorgen said. “We don’t want to leave you behind.”

As if they could. “I’ve got it,” I said.

“Right. Quirk. Ten o’clock. Here we go.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Kimmalyn said, and then both their ships disappeared.

# Ten

I still wasn't sure which way ten o'clock was, but I guessed which tree gap Jorgen was referring to and reached through the negative realm, pulling myself out on the far side. This was my third hyperjump in a shorter space of time than I would have liked, and the eyes seemed more fixated on me than normal, but I emerged from the negative realm half a kilometer from Jorgen and Kimmalyn, who were much closer together.

*How do you do that?* I asked Jorgen.

*I send the slugs an image of a location. And then we ask nicely.*

*You ask nicely?*

*It's not the only way, Jorgen said. But it's ours.*

I couldn't argue with their results.

We had a moment to reposition while the enemy shot out of the holes in Hollow. I tried to track the battle on my sensor screen. Independence ships were in the air now, defending the base. I wasn't sure how many Unity personnel were still inside, but we could deal with them in a minute. Hopefully once we'd won this skirmish they'd surrender.

Skyward Flight scattered, leading the enemy ships in circles around the tree and heading toward the Independence base. Jorgen and Kimmalyn hung back as Jorgen gave instructions to the others. I still didn't understand it. If a leader did that in the junior leagues, or in air force training, they would be immediately replaced. You didn't raise your shooting averages or your evasion scores by hanging back, and if your stats weren't impressive enough you couldn't advance. Watching Jorgen work made me wonder if I'd made too much of human aggression based on a few verbal arguments and the willingness to shoot out a single cockpit.

Four Unity ships charged up the branches toward us and I pivoted my ship, showering one of them with destructor fire. The ship dodged around



one of the branches, flying close to the structures hanging beneath, using them as cover.

That was a cowardly move. I wasn't going to fire at the ship while it passed over civilians, but I also wasn't going to let it get away. I kept pace right over it, readying more fire. The ship twisted around the branch, winding up in a spiral pattern, and I followed. I waited for a clear patch of branch with no civilian targets, and then opened fire. The ship tried to dodge, but Kimmalyn flew in from the side, her destructors blocking off the path of escape. The ship's shield went down, and Kimmalyn's shot hit one of the boosters, sending it spinning away from the branch.

The Unity pilot ejected but missed the tree, floating down below Hollow's jagged acclivity stone.

*Alanik, Quilan said in my head. I don't know where you found another cytonic, but you're only making this worse on yourself by resisting.*

I almost retorted that he was only making this worse on himself by fighting us, but I held myself back. He wasn't worth it.

"Amphi, Nedder, Sentry needs support," Jorgen said. I followed Kimmalyn back to Jorgen. Down by the base of the tree, I could see Sentry's ship being cornered by three ships that had joined their light hooks into a net. They closed in, one of them speeding ahead and cutting her off, catching her ship in their light net and hauling her along behind them. FM was hot on their tail, destructors blazing.

"Sentry," Jerkface said. "Want me to pull you out?"

"Affirmative," Sentry said. "Cheeky's ready."

Sentry disappeared out of the net. The ships wavered for a second, probably wondering what had happened, and then reversed, trying to catch FM in their nets. Amphi and Nedder shot two of them down while FM danced away.

"Um, Alanik?" Jorgen said. "Who is this voice in my head that isn't you?"

"Quilan," I said. "He's on his way."

"He wants to know who I am, but I'm not answering him."

"That's for the best," I said. "Trust me."

We'd shaken most of the first wave of ships, but the second wave bore down on us. They'd be here in moments.

"Jerkface," Arturo said. "We can't take all those ships. Do we have a plan?"

"Unless we have some way to defend the base," Jorgen said, "we're going to have to evacuate."

I'd hoped to have more time to reach the other Independence bases, to call more fighters to join us. If half the fighters *here* had abandoned us, we had even less support than I'd hoped. If Detritus had sent more of their military, maybe...

I'd told Cobb I would make use of what he was willing to send, and I intended to do it. We'd rescued my people. That was still an improvement. If the humans were willing to work with me, we could press forward together from there.

"Let's do it," I said.

"Where will we go?" Arturo asked. "Can we hyperjump home to Detritus?"

"Already?" Nedder said. "We were just starting to have fun."

"No, we can't," Jorgen said. "I got a message from Cobb on the hypercomm. He said the assembly has arranged a meeting with the Superiority. He's had to order our arrest upon our return to convince my mother to keep him in the loop. He's worried about the concessions they're making. If we bring Alanik's people to Detritus now, he's afraid they'll end up as bargaining chips."

"That's not happening," I said.

"Scud, those ships are coming in fast, Jerkface," FM said. "We can't pull everyone out with one hyperjump. We'd make too big a target of ourselves trying to connect everyone together."

"FM is right," Jorgen said. "We'll have to use the hyperdrives, and that means it needs to be somewhere the slugs know, or somewhere I can see, at least for the first jump."

"The platform," I said. "Wandering Leaf. You can use your hyperdrives to get beneath the autoturrets. The Unity cytonics can't teleport. They can't

come after us there.”

At least not unless Quilan could convince his Superiority friends to send hyperjumping cytonics to extract us. He wouldn't want to do that if he could help it; he was trying to prove how useful and cooperative he could be. He'd lose his leverage if he made the Superiority do all the work.

“That might be our best option,” Jorgen said. “We'll bring as many of the UrDail with us as we can. Alanik, can you communicate with them?”

“On it,” I said.

Quilan's reinforcements were arriving now, destructor fire raining through the branches above. Skyward Flight met them in front of the Independence base, Jorgen giving orders for his flight to defend the airspace out front. I switched over to the Independence channel. “Independence fighters,” I said, “there's a fleet incoming, and the force is overwhelming. We need to flee. Who is your commander?”

“Alanik,” my brother said, “our captain was injured in the blast. I can speak for the group. Where would we go?”

I was sorry any of them had been injured, but I was glad Gilaf wasn't among them. “We're going to abandon the base,” I said, “and retreat to Wandering Leaf.”

A long silence followed. “To Wandering Leaf,” another pilot said. “The platform that *shoots at us*.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Stay together in the airspace in front of the base. Have someone land and tell those without ships to gather inside the damaged Superiority vessel.” That might be the only way to retrieve Rinakin's family and our other noncombatant allies, in addition to any wounded. “We're coming to get you. Our allies have some...unconventional methods, but we're not going to leave you behind.”

“Will do,” Gilaf said, though he sounded dubious.

“Hold on,” I said. “We're going to get you out of here.”

“We've got your back,” Gilaf said.

“And we've got yours.” I switched back to the channel with the humans. “The civilians are gathering inside the broken ship. We should be able to use a light-lance to bring that with us, correct?”

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “Quirk and I are headed toward Wandering Leaf. I’ll send Quirk in first, and then the rest of our ships can jump to hers. It might take us a couple of trips to get everyone.”

I hoped their hyperdrives somehow helped them evade the eyes. They must, since the Superiority felt safe using them as often as they did.

“If you get a chance, I’d appreciate a ride from one of your hyperdrives,” I said. I didn’t want to risk taking another jump so soon, not if I didn’t have to.

“Okay, sure,” Jorgen said. He sounded confused, but he didn’t question me. “Help us defend the base, and then we’ll pull you out when we’re done.”

I followed him and Kimmalyn on the sensor screen as they approached the platform. They flew through the miasma at close to Mag-9—a speed that must have threatened to rattle their ships apart.

These humans meant business.

“Careful not to get too close,” I told them.

“We have experience with these things,” Jorgen said. “We’ll keep our distance.”

I leaned on my throttle, catching up to the humans in front of the base. Enemy ships tore through the airspace, trying to run the humans off, but they fought in tandem, harassing the enemy enough to keep them from landing and arresting my people.

I swept down toward the entrance to the hangar, taking up a defensive position near the broken Superiority ship. Even from this distance I could see people pressed up against the glass at the back of the hold, looking up at us, probably wondering what was about to happen.

At least they’d listened to me. I wouldn’t have been able to get them out otherwise.

“All right, I have visual on the surface of the platform,” Jorgen said. “Quirk, you ready?”

“Ready,” Kimmalyn said.

I watched on my proximity sensors as Kimmalyn’s ship disappeared from the sky.

“Quirk, status?” Jorgen said.

“I’m fine!” Kimmalyne said. “Near the surface of the platform, underneath the autofire. Looking for a hangar entrance now.”

“We can’t wait,” Jorgen said. “Skyward Flight, you are a go to bounce.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Arturo said. “We’re on it.”

In the airspace directly above, I felt Quilan descending from his reentry into the atmosphere. *Alanik*, he said. *Stop this before someone gets hurt.*

*Too late*, I said back. I fired on an enemy ship, shaking it off FM’s tail, and FM pegged one of the Independence ships with her light-lance.

Then they both disappeared.

All over the battlefield, the humans disappeared with Independence ships in tow. A moment later FM’s ship appeared again, so close to Jorgen’s that they nearly collided.

“Sorry!” FM said over the radio. “We really need to work on their sense of space when we’re in the air!”

Several of the other humans’ ships also reappeared, and I left my post by the base entrance to provide some covering fire while Jorgen did his best to dodge his own reappearing flightmates.

“Why are they doing that?” I asked Jorgen over the radio.

“We’re using Quirk’s slug as an anchor on one side and mine on the other,” Jorgen said. “It’s a new tactic. We’re still working out the kinks.”

The humans made another lap, taking more of the Independence fighters up to the platform.

“Amphi,” Jorgen said as Arturo reappeared. “Get the Superiority ship.”

“On it,” Arturo said as I flew in front of the hangar, drawing the fire of the nearby ships and then twist-rolling over the top of the base to evade them. I didn’t see Arturo jump out with the damaged Superiority ship, but when I returned the hangar was empty. A ship closed on me, destructors blazing.

*Stand down, Alanik*, Quilan said in my mind. *Your force is dwindling and you have nowhere to run.*

That wasn’t precisely true, but I gathered Quilan hadn’t figured that out yet. I led him away from the base, and from Jorgen. I didn’t want any of the

human ships getting caught in the crossfire if he decided to—

A current *ripped* through the negative realm by my left wing, and I sent my ship into a roll.

If Quilan was willing to throw mindblades, he must have gotten better at them recently. Last time I'd trained with him, he'd have cut himself out of the sky trying something like that.

"How many ships are left?" I asked Jorgen.

"Not many," Jorgen said. "One more trip should do it. How's everything on your side, Quirk?"

"Found a hangar," Kimmalyrn said. "Looks like the inside has working atmospheric generators."

That was good. I'd assumed there wouldn't be much of use on the platform, because if it were still useful the Superiority would have dismantled it long ago. Sometimes scavengers and thrill seekers risked the trip beyond the autoturrets, but that was about it.

*Alanik*, Quilan said, *you can't hide from us. Surrender immediately.*

*Or?* I asked. *Didn't the Superiority want me alive?*

*Yes*, Quilan said. *But if you insist on resisting, arrangements will have to be made.*

And with that, Quilan and two other ships behind him opened fire.

I threw my ship into a defensive sequence, but it wasn't as deft or as immediate as it would have been in my own ship where the controls were second nature. I tipped my nose in the direction of Wandering Leaf and hit overburn, shooting out in front of Quilan and the others. My ship shook like it might fall apart and my gravitational capacitors absorbed the g-forces, but a moment later I could see Wandering Leaf through the swirling red mist—the autoturret platform was as big as one of the larger branches of Industry.

Quilan was catching up to me rapidly, and I kept my mind open to the negative realm around me so I could dodge as he sent two more bursts of mindblades after my wings. I couldn't catch a ride with one of the humans and their hyperdrives while Quilan was on my tail, not without putting them in danger. I was going to have to risk one more hyperjump, and hope I came out the other side.

“Alanik,” Jorgen said. “Can you get out of there?”

“Working on it,” I said. I’d need to hyperjump under the automated weapons, but to arrive in a position that exact—below the autofire zone but above the platform so I didn’t crash—I’d need to be able to see where I was going.

“I think that’s the last of them, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

“Got it. We’re pulling out. Alanik, do you need assistance?”

Quilan could tear the human ships to bits with those mindblades. The only one who could see them coming was Jorgen, and I didn’t have time to explain what to watch for.

“I’ve got it,” I said, reaching through the negative realm to the space above the platform. There was a ripple behind me, and I dodged too late. A concussion bolt hit my mind, throwing off my focus and wiping out my vision so all I could see were stars. I nearly lost consciousness.

Fire hit my shield in rapid bursts, depleting it. I didn’t have time to reorient myself. I reached into the negative realm and pulled myself and my ship through to the platform on the other side.

I could barely see the eyes, though I could feel their hatred. They were reaching for me, searching for me, ready to tear me apart if they found me

---

I emerged, my vision returning, but in my confusion I’d targeted a space too high in the air above the platform. One of the enormous guns pivoted in my direction and opened fire. I dropped immediately toward the platform—

Too late. Gunfire hit my booster, and my ship shuddered and shook. The gun fired again—

I targeted a spot closer to the surface of the platform and yanked myself into the negative realm. Thousands of eyes watched my ship as it coughed and skipped, and then I was back, skimming toward the surface of the platform. I tried to pull up, but I was losing altitude fast.

“Alanik!” Jorgen said over the radio. My sensors showed Skyward Flight and the Independence fighters farther behind me. My ship sputtered, the miasma parting as my nose dove toward the hard surface of the platform.

## Eleven

“Eject!” Jorgen shouted at me over the radio.

I scrambled for the eject lever on the side of my seat, and my seat destabilized, still attached to the ship.

Scud, that wasn’t the eject lever.

*Where is it?* I shouted at him through the negative realm, and an image formed in my mind, perfectly clear, of a lever directly under my knees. My ship shuddered toward the surface of the platform—

And I hauled up on the lever, my canopy exploding outward and rockets beneath my seat propelling it into the air. I prepared to hyperjump again if the ejection shot me up into the path of the autoturrets, but I flew through the air below them, and then my parachute opened, yanking me back and dragging me along the surface of the platform. I rolled to a stop at the base of one of the autoturrets.

I unstrapped from the chute and ran along the metal platform in the direction of my wreckage, the miasma clinging to my flightsuit.

The autoturrets fired above me, warding off Quilan and his people. They were peppering the platform with destructor fire, though their shots went wild because they couldn’t shoot accurately from beyond the range of the autofire. I ducked under the metal roof that stretched around the autoturrets, working my way toward the hangar entrance Kimmalyn had found. Skyward Flight and the Independence fighters had all parked their ships on the empty hangar floor. Both humans and UrDail had already climbed out of their ships and removed their helmets, staring at each other.

Jorgen popped his canopy open, looking around at the other ships.

Counting them. Making sure his people were all right, seeing how many of the Independence ships we’d rescued. There were about two dozen of them, plus the broken Superiority ship. I recognized Rinakin’s daughter among several other people peering out of it.



I pulled off my helmet. Kimmalyn was right; the platform was still generating atmosphere. I wondered if scavengers had maintained the generators to make their jobs easier. Getting past the autofire was difficult and dangerous, but not impossible if you had enough drones to distract the autoturrets. Those who had been here would have had to be well funded, in addition to crazy. We could only claim the second.

“We made it,” Jorgen said. “Alanik, your ship—”

“It’s gone,” I said. There might be something we could salvage, but it wasn’t going to fly again.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Jorgen said. He didn’t say a word about the destruction of their property.

My brother climbed out of one of the Independence ships and approached me slowly, eyeing the humans like he was afraid of them. When he reached me, he embraced me. “Alanik,” he said. “I worried they’d captured you.”

Leave it to Gilaf to worry about me when *he* was the one who’d been captured.

“I’m glad you’re okay, but—” He looked around the hangar. “*Humans?*”

I hadn’t told anyone in my family what had happened on my mission to Starsight, only that things hadn’t gone as planned. “They are willing to ally with us against the Superiority.”

I saw several of the other Independence pilots looking at each other, trying to make sense of this news. Inin, Rinakin’s daughter, stepped forward. She wore a fitted maternity jacket over her round stomach. I remembered now—she was expecting a baby in a few sun cycles. When she’d first announced it, Rinakin had said he wished he could retire from his position to help care for the baby, but of course the political situation made that impossible. “My father was worried the Superiority would come after you,” she said. “Do you know if he’s—”

I wasn’t going to spread jam over this news. “They took him,” I said. “We need to find him before he’s turned over to the Superiority. Quilan is trying to gather us together to use as leverage. Rinakin and me—and the

rest of you—in exchange for better trade terms, more advancement.” I didn’t know exactly what they were asking for, but...

“Progress for ReDawn,” my brother said with disgust, and I heard murmurs of agreement throughout the group of pilots.

Inin looked to Jorgen. She didn’t have a pin to translate, but Jorgen did. “You’re here to help rescue my father? To help us turn the wind to our favor?”

“Um,” Jorgen said. “We’re here to make an alliance.” He looked at me. “We’re stronger together, in theory, but we’re in a bit of a spot here. This isn’t exactly a strong position from which to mount a counteroffensive.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But we saved my people, and for that I’m grateful.”

Gilaf smiled at me, but he looked worried. All of them did.

With good reason.

FM looked up through the skylight of the hangar, scanning for ships. “Can they get to us here?” she asked.

I searched for Quilan in the negative realm, and felt his mind hovering out in the miasma. “I don’t think so,” I said. “They don’t have any cytonics who can hyperjump. They could try to bring drones to distract the turrets, but they wouldn’t be able to get many ships in that way, maybe one or two, so we’d have the overwhelming force.”

By a large amount, with the Independence fighters here. Quilan would have to fall back and regroup. Given his current position, he knew it.

If the Superiority was really bent on collecting me, they’d show up eventually. But even Quilan didn’t have Superiority cytonics at his beck and call—and especially not if he expected to prove himself to them—so we’d bought ourselves some time at least.

“Can you hear their communications?” Jorgen asked. “Are they making a plan?”

I didn’t hear any hypercomm transmissions in the area, but Quilan would know I’d be listening for that. He might have switched to radio. “Can you try to find their channel?” I asked Jorgen.

“Sure,” he said. He reached for his radio, disconnecting the headset so we could all hear. He flipped through silence and static, and then a voice projected from his dash.

“—people of ReDawn, with bipartisan support, we are greatly pleased to announce—”

Gilaf swore, and I almost echoed him. The voice belonged to Nanalis.

“Leave it there,” I said, and Jorgen pulled his fingers away from the dial.

Nanalis addressed the audience imperiously. “—our collaboration to elevate the UrDail onto the galactic stage.”

“Who is that?” Arturo asked, drawing closer.

“Council President,” I said. “Elected leader of ReDawn. Currently, anyway.”

Inin folded her arms and leaned back against the Superiority ship. Her father had been opposing Nanalis at Council for years.

“Thank you,” a familiar voice said, and Inin’s eyes widened. “This is Rinakin, High Chancellor of Independence.” It *was* Rinakin—I recognized his voice. “We may have our differences, but one thing both Unity and Independence agree on is that we want the best for ReDawn, and for her people.”

“Is that the person we were here to save?” Jorgen asked.

I nodded, though all around the room I could feel the Independence pilots tensing. Our side wasn’t supposed to talk like that, particularly not while Unity was in the middle of a military coup.

“It is time to set aside our differences,” Rinakin continued, “in the name of progress for ReDawn. I would like to announce a bipartisan cooperation with the Superiority.”

That was rotten wood. Rinakin was using nearly the exact words Nanalis had used in her announcement during the game. Jorgen looked at me.

“They’re making him say this,” I said. “They have to be.” Inin’s face hardened, and she nodded.

“I will be working with Nanalis and the Council over the coming days,” Rinakin said, “to ensure the future of both Unity and Independence, and—first and foremost—progress.”

“Progress,” Gilaf said. “That’s what they say, but they’re selling us out. All the other outposts gave in. All of them but us.”

“There is one matter that concerns me as we move forward with the coalition,” Rinakin said. “Alanik, if you are out there, turn yourself in. It’s not too late to be part of the solution. Thank you.”

The broadcast ended, and Jorgen switched off the radio.

## Twelve

I stared straight ahead, trying to make sense of it. One of the humans I hadn't met yet scratched his head. "I'm not the smartest guy around," he said, "but that sounded a lot like a vote in support of the Superiority." I recognized his voice from the radio—this was Nedder, who flew with Arturo.

"They got to him somehow," I said. They must have threatened him. Bribery would never work on Rinakin. He was too principled for that. But everyone had something they were afraid of. Everyone had something they weren't willing to sacrifice.

I didn't know what that thing would be for me, and I hoped I never had to find out.

"My father would never capitulate to the Superiority," Inin said.

"That's true," I said, mostly for the benefit of the humans. Because it was true. Rinakin believed in debate, in discussion, in continuing to advocate and work with Unity. He believed in persuading people to see reason, but he always stayed true to his principles. There was no way he'd flipped sides in a matter of hours. And even if he *had*, he would never have called me out like that.

He *sent* me away. He told me to get help. He wouldn't do that and then announce to the entire planet that I was a fugitive.

"That was his voice though," I said. "They might have told him they'd captured his family, threatened to torture them."

Gilaf squirmed, and I saw several of the other Independence pilots looking at me in alarm. The idea that Unity might torture someone seemed too violent, too aggressive, even for them.

But given that Quilan had just tried to *kill me*, I wasn't feeling so charitable.

“It’s possible,” Inin said. “In that case, we need to rescue him.” She looked at Jorgen. “You saved us. Are you willing to help us with this as well?”

“Rinakin sent me to the humans to begin with,” I told Inin. “This alliance was his idea.” This last operation hadn’t gone as well as we would have liked, but we had more fighters now and there was still hope.

“We did come to help,” Jorgen said, and I could practically hear him sorting through his orders, trying to figure out what he was authorized to do. “It’s obviously terrible that your leader is being used against your movement.”

“But,” Arturo said, “we don’t *know* that he’s being threatened, do we? How do we know that he hasn’t changed his mind?”

Inin’s eyes narrowed, but I spoke before she could. “He hasn’t. He wouldn’t.”

Arturo and Jorgen exchanged a glance.

These humans didn’t know Rinakin at all. They didn’t know *me* well enough to trust my judgment on this, and they knew the rest of my people even less. In their position, I’d doubt me too.

“We need to think this through before we do anything,” Arturo continued.

“Yeah,” Nedder said, “wouldn’t want to defect on bad information or anything.”

“We didn’t defect,” Jorgen said. “We were ordered to go.”

“We were specifically *not* ordered to go,” FM said. “Remember?”

“Cobb phrased it that way because he had to,” Jorgen said. “They were still orders, even if they were...not-orders. That means it wasn’t defection. Right?” He looked around at the others for confirmation, and they all stared at him.

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn said.

Jorgen swore.

The girl with the blue hair—Sentry, I’d guessed based on the process of elimination—stepped up to me. “We haven’t met,” she said. “I’m Sadie. And that’s Nedd.”

Nedd. At least that would be easy to remember.

Sadie indicated the two men leaning against one of the ships. “And that’s T-Stall and Catnip. Their real names are Trey and Corbin, but no one calls them that. They just go by their callsigns.”

I had no idea which one was T-Stall and which one was Catnip, but I didn’t ask.

“This is my brother, Gilaf,” I said. “And Rinakin’s daughter, Inin.” I didn’t know the names of everyone else, and no one seemed to feel that this was the time to require the humans to remember them all.

I turned to Gilaf. I needed to convince the humans to mount an offensive against Unity from here, and that would be easier to do without the rest of my people standing here listening. “We’re going to need to map the facilities here,” I said. “Figure out what we’re working with. Can you take the pilots and try to find somewhere safe for Rinakin’s family and the others to rest?”

Gilaf glanced at Inin’s pregnant belly, and Inin glared at him. She plainly disliked being treated like a baby simply because she was carrying one.

“I’m *fine*,” Inin said. “But it does seem wise to make sure we’re safe here. Your captain is injured, and will need someplace to rest.”

That was right. I stepped up to the exposed interior of the Superiority ship. Several civilians sat inside, along with the Independence captain, who lay on the floor with a medic attending to a wound in his leg.

“Does he need further aid?” I asked. I could hyperjump him to a hospital if it came to that, but if it wasn’t necessary I didn’t want to risk it.

“We can manage here,” the medic said. “Though he’ll need time before he can return to duty.”

“All right,” Gilaf said. He turned to Jorgen. “Thank you for coming to our aid. Though that thing you did, moving us from place to place—are you *all* cytonics?”

Jorgen looked alarmed, like he wasn’t sure if he should give up their secrets. The humans had all left their slugs in their ships, and I didn’t want to anger them, but knowing what assets we had on our side would only inspire my people. “They have hyperdrives in their ships,” I told Gilaf.

“Shake the branches,” Gilaf said, and I heard more murmurs of shock and relief from the other pilots. “We look forward to our alliance.” He moved into the ship, helping the medic lift their captain, and together the group of pilots moved through the vestibule that led deeper into the platform. Inin and the other civilians followed them.

I hoped the area wasn’t too dangerous, and that any scavengers were long gone. But Gilaf and the others had training. They could handle themselves and protect the others.

I turned to Jorgen and the other humans. We’d come a long way, and I needed to convince them to stick with me a little longer.

“What do we do now?” Jorgen asked. “We don’t know if your friend Rinakin wants to be rescued. And these people...are they the only UrDail we can expect to be on our side?”

“Rinakin *is* on our side,” I said.

“Yes,” Jorgen said. “But he’s speaking publicly against you, and he’s only one person.”

Lots of people would listen to Rinakin, which made him one very important person. But given what we’d just heard, that worked against us at the moment.

“You’re a fugitive,” Jorgen said. “And now *we’re* fugitives for helping you.”

“We’re not going to escape court-martial if we go home,” Sadie said. “Are we?”

“Jorgen might,” Kimmalyln said. “Is your mom really going to put you in prison for defection?”

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “But it doesn’t make me feel any better knowing they’re willing to do that to the rest of you. *Scud*. What do we do?”

“You could call Cobb,” FM said. “See what he wants us to do.”

Jorgen shook his head. “Cobb said he’d be in touch, but I can’t call him. He’s trying to maintain the illusion that he had nothing to do with our departure, so my parents don’t shut him out of the loop entirely.”

“Can they do that?” Kimmalyln asked.



“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “There aren’t a lot of specific codes on the books for how intergalactic diplomacy should be handled, which gives them some leeway.”

“Diplomacy is a mistake,” I said. “You’re no better off there than you are here, not as long as your government is considering capitulation.”

“If both our governments are moving in the same direction, what are *we* going to do about it?” Jorgen asked. “We’re pilots. We don’t have control over things like that.”

“There are plenty of people on ReDawn who will do the right thing when they can see it clearly,” I said. “But they’re being deceived. Unity talks like we can all get along, but we can’t do that with people who want to oppress us.” I looked around at the others, gauging their reactions. I was in a precarious position here. If they decided not to help me, the other pilots and I would be in it alone.

The humans all looked at each other. They seemed resigned, which in this case was a good thing. I just needed to give them a reason to believe there was hope.

“Rescuing Rinakin will make a difference,” I said. “He’s beloved by many of my people. If Unity is threatening him and we get him to safety, then he can speak the truth, tell people what Unity is really up to. They’ve taken over the military, captured our people. If people hear that news from Rinakin’s mouth, more of them will turn to our cause.”

Jorgen sighed. “Okay. We’re committed. Let’s make the best of it.” He looked up through the skylight at the giant autoturret, which had stopped firing. Through the negative realm, I could feel Quilan moving farther away. “What exactly is this platform doing here?”

“It was a battle platform,” I said. “Abandoned after the second war, centuries ago. I think it used to move through the miasma at will, but now it simply drifts.”

“We should take a look around,” Jorgen said. “The platforms on Detritus are similar, and they have all kinds of capabilities besides the autofire. Maybe it will have a shield we could get working, or something else that might help us rescue Rinakin.” Jorgen turned to me. “Is there a reason you

don't hyperjump in and pull him up here? Is it because you don't know where he is?"

"If he keeps broadcasting, it will be easy enough to triangulate his location," I said. "But some of the Unity cytonics have the ability to inhibit, so they won't leave Rinakin unguarded. The Superiority also granted Unity some cytonic inhibitors. More than the one in this ship." I gestured toward the wreckage.

"Is the inhibitor still on board?" FM asked.

It was a good question. The ship's inhibitor had stayed active, even after the cockpit was obliterated. It wasn't working now, but the technology should still be on board. I stepped into the empty hull, examining what was left of the ship.

Rows of passenger seats were mostly still intact, and at the end of the aisle was a panel with instrumentation—and a box set into the side of the ship. I moved up the aisle with FM right behind me.

"That's a taynix box," FM said, and she squeezed past me and knelt down next to it. The other humans crowded around the hole in the hull, watching.

"There isn't a slug in it," Jorgen said. "We'd be able to feel it if there were."

He was right—the box felt empty to me. But when FM unlatched it and pulled it open, a pale blue taynix with bright green spines stared up at us out of the box.

"Hey, baby," FM said, reaching in gently and pulling the slug out. She looked at Jorgen over her shoulder. "No slug in the box, huh?"

"I can't sense it in the negative realm," I said. I couldn't even touch the area where it rested in FM's arms, though the area had been too small for me to notice before. "It's...inhibited itself."

"It's *adorable*," Sadie said.

FM ran a hand down its spines, and it hummed quietly, as if nervous.

"I guess that answers the question about how they do it," Jorgen said. "And now we have one. Maybe we could figure out how to use it to inhibit the platform."

“Can’t you just ask it nicely?” I asked.

“We can try,” FM said. “But it might need a little more instruction. Working with the others took time.”

“Time,” the slug trilled softly.

“Still,” Jorgen said. “If we can harness the platform’s capabilities, we could buy ourselves some. That would also give us some time to determine Rinakin’s location.”

FM continued to hold the new slug, and she didn’t seem eager to let it go. Technically this slug should belong to my people, because it was recovered on our turf, but I didn’t know what to do with it, so for now it was probably better off in her hands. “I expect they’ll be keeping Rinakin on or near the Council tree. That’s where the Unity cytonics live.”

“More trees,” Nedd said. “Do you really live on those? Not down on the surface of the planet?”

“ReDawn is a gas giant,” I said. “There is no surface, except the core. And the atmosphere down there isn’t breathable. We only go down there for mining.”

“This is your home planet?” Sadie asked. “Like, your people lived in trees even before you had starfighters?”

“Yes,” I said. “We’ve always made the trees of ReDawn our home.”

Sadie made a little squealing noise. “That is *so cool*.”

“And kind of terrifying,” FM said. “What if you fall?”

“Do you often fall off your platforms?” I asked.

“No,” FM said. “But we don’t really *live* on those. It’s a military base. The civilians on Detritus all live underground. There are no children on Platform Prime.”

“We learn young how to be careful,” I said. “We don’t walk on the edges of the branches without safety equipment. We have walls and railings and nets. A few people fall every year, but those deaths are mostly due to equipment failures, like having a cord break when rubber-jumping.”

They all stared at me like I’d lost my mind.

“All right,” Jorgen said. “Let’s do some poking around and see what we can find on this platform.”

I nodded. I wasn't sure what there would be to work with, but at least the humans weren't talking about fleeing anymore.

"Alanik," Jorgen said. "Why don't you try the radio while we look around? See if you can find any more broadcasts that might give us a clue what the people who took Rinakin are planning."

The humans probably wanted to conference without me, but I couldn't stop them from talking to each other. Trying would make me look desperate. "Okay," I said.

FM carried the blue slug out of the ship, and the humans moved toward the doorway that led deeper into the platform. I climbed out of the Superiority ship and moved to Jorgen's cockpit to fiddle with the radio. There was a box bolted beneath his dash, similar to the one that had held the inhibitor slug. I popped the door open, and Boomslug peered out at me expectantly, like I might provide more algae strips.

He was about to be sorely disappointed.

The humans hadn't been gone for more than a few minutes when someone approached the open canopy. Arturo walked toward me with his yellow and blue slug in a sling across his chest. He must have come back to retrieve it from his ship.

I moved to stand, but Arturo held up a hand. "Alanik," he said. "Can we talk?"

"Yes," I said.

Arturo looked over his shoulder, like he was afraid we'd be overheard. The slug in the sling regarded me quizzically. "I was thinking about what you said on Detritus, about the Superiority wanting you to turn over the humans you were working with."

I hadn't said that to him, so I guessed Jorgen must have told him. "We weren't working with any humans," I said.

"Right," Arturo said, his face grim. "But you are now."

*Oh.* I'd been so focused on getting help that I hadn't thought of how that would look. Clearly I shouldn't have told Jorgen about that particular demand.

“We were just fighting the people who want to turn you over to the Superiority together,” I said.

“Sure,” Arturo said. “But shooting at a few ships doesn’t mean you aren’t planning to betray us in some other way.”

That was true, and nothing I could say would prove otherwise. “So you believe I’m lying to you.”

“I don’t know,” Arturo said. “I’m not sure what your motivations are. Jorgen believes you do want to make an alliance with Detritus, that you’re going to teach him how to use his powers.”

“Use his powers!” his taynix added, as if for emphasis.

“Easy, Naga,” Arturo said, petting its spines.

“I will,” I said. “I would be happy to, because we’re working together. You all risked a lot to be here.”

“We did,” Arturo said. “So I hope you didn’t come to Detritus looking for humans you could use to appease the Superiority.”

I bristled. “I would never work with them. Their wood is rotted all the way through.”

“I want to believe you,” Arturo said. “So does Jorgen. That’s why he didn’t tell Cobb about what you said.”

He should have, obviously. Their commander had made a decision without all the information. “Jorgen suspects me of deceiving you,” I said.

“No,” Arturo said. “Jorgen is too busy worrying about whether he disobeyed orders. *I’m* worried you might have deceived us.” He looked me straight in the eyes. His were dark and deep, not clear and bright like most UrDail. “Can we trust you?”

“You already have. You did it when you left your planet with me.” I’d fled when I’d first met them, not willing to offer them my trust, yet they’d come to help me anyway. I wouldn’t have done the same, but I was glad that in this way they weren’t like me.

“We did,” Arturo said. “Because the potential benefits outweigh the risks. We need allies, same as you. And we may be clueless when it comes to galactic politics, but we’re not helpless. If you turn on us, we will fight back, you understand?”

Arturo presented the threat calmly and evenly, like it was nothing more than a fact.

These humans possessed hyperdrives, had found the secret where I had failed. They'd also survived for nearly a century in the face of Superiority hostility.

"It would be a very serious mistake to underestimate you," I said.

"I'm glad we agree on that."

"And I have no intention of betraying you or your people."

Arturo kept watching me, his face thoughtful, evaluating me. It bothered me that I couldn't read in his eyes what it was that he saw.

"Thank you," Arturo said. "I hope we can keep this between us."

And then he turned and walked confidently back in the direction Jorgen and the others had gone.

I watched until he was out of sight. I hadn't baited the humans here with the intention of trading them to the Superiority, but I did want to use them, in a sense. Unity used the specter of human extinction to terrify my people into submission. If my people saw humans fighting on our side, they'd see that resistance was possible, even against terrifying odds. Their *existence* was a weapon I could use against my enemies.

Given the circumstances, I would be foolish to do otherwise.

# Thirteen

I could only wait in the ship for so long before I set off to find Jorgen and the others. It wasn't hard to find Jorgen at least, because I could feel his mind and follow in that direction. The passageways here were smooth and sterile, similar to the ones on Detritus, though these were structured more like large tubes than square halls.

Jorgen seemed to shift for a moment, and I wondered if he could sense me coming toward him.

And then— *Alanik?* he said in my mind.

*Yes, I replied. You were able to establish contact.*

*It's...similar to communicating with the slugs, but also different. It's easier when Spensa establishes the connection first.*

*Have you spoken with Spensa recently?* I didn't know if she'd be able to communicate out of the negative realm the same way we communicated through it.

*Yes, twice. Both times she kind of...appeared. But she wasn't really there. Not like a hyperjump.*

There was a kind of sadness that accompanied this. A wistfulness maybe.

*You and Spensa are close,* I said.

Another emotion joined the sadness. Embarrassment perhaps.

*Oh,* I said. *You and Spensa are a mate pair?*

*A what? A...no, not a mate pair. I mean, there is no mating involved. I mean—*

I laughed, and Jorgen's voice disappeared from my mind. I thought he'd withdrawn intentionally, and if so that was good. He was learning even without my instruction. I'd found that was the best way, with cytonic powers. They weren't learned directly so much as experienced and guided. Your mind knew what to do intuitively, if only you could get out of your own way and let it.

I caught up to some of the humans outside a room filled with instrumentation panels. Jorgen and Kimmalyne leaned in the doorway, watching FM as she pored over them.

“Did you find anything useful?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “I don’t suppose you happen to be an engineer?”

“No, only a pilot,” I said. I approached and glanced at the buttons and switches FM was examining. “Do any of you have expertise?”

“Rig does,” FM said. “He might be able to tell us if any of this would activate a shield, or connect to a cytonic inhibitor.”

“Any of those would be useful,” I said.

FM looked over her shoulder at Jorgen. “As much as I’d love to ask Rig, I don’t know that dragging him into this is a good idea.”

“I wonder if we could get him out without anyone noticing,” Jorgen said. “If we had one of the slugs take us H-O-M-E...”

The pin translated that last bit as a set of letters, but I had no idea what they spelled in the human’s language. “What does that mean?” I asked.

Jorgen sighed. “It’s the word for the place where you live. FM accidentally made that the keyword for the slugs to take us back to Detritus.”

“It wasn’t an *accident*,” FM said. “It was a *logical choice*.”

“And we’re trying to get them to only do it if we say their names first as a command,” Jorgen continued. “But sometimes they mess up and someone says something like, I miss H-O-M-E, and their slug takes them to the engineering bay on Platform Prime. Which is only an inconvenience if they were, say, in the mess hall or something.”

Kimmalyne sighed. “But it’s a lot more annoying if you were about to climb into a cleansing pod, naked as the day you were born.”

“Not that she would know,” FM said.

“Bless the stars of those startled engineers,” Kimmalyne added.

“So now we’re reduced to spelling basic words,” Jorgen said. “When we could have picked something more unusual for the code word.”

“So you say the word,” I said, “and the slug hyperjumps with you? That’s convenient.”



“When it works it’s awesome,” Jorgen said. “When it doesn’t it’s annoying at best.”

“Humiliating at worst,” Kimmalyln said.

“It could be *life threatening*,” Jorgen insisted.

“Hey,” FM said. “You and Rig were the ones who said we should stick with the same word when we trained the rest of the slugs for simplicity’s sake.”

“We’re still working with them,” Jorgen said. “We only had a short time with them before you arrived. But so far they will all go H-O-M-E when they’re asked. Some of them will also take us out a couple of kilometers if we tell them to J-U-M-P.”

“I don’t know what that means, either,” I said. “I don’t think the pins know how to spell.”

“It’s the word for leaping up in the air,” FM said. “Also the second half of hyperjump, which they don’t seem to recognize as a command, thank goodness. They’re all a little better at only doing that command when we say their names first.”

“Probably because they’d rather go H-O-M-E than hop somewhere random,” Kimmalyln said. “Wouldn’t we all?”

“Are those the only commands they answer to?” I asked. The humans were freely giving up the details on how to use their hyperdrives, but I wasn’t going to point this out to them.

“If you want to do anything else,” FM said, “you need a cytonic. Jorgen can ask the slugs to hyperjump anywhere he can see, or anywhere he can visualize that the slugs can recognize. The rest of us are limited to verbal commands, which we have to drill beforehand. The slugs pick it up pretty quickly, and they understand some basic abstract concepts like danger. We’re working on a bonding program. That’s why we keep them with us in slings—though engineering is working on a backpack as well. The idea is that even if the pilot can’t give a command, the slugs are attached enough to their pilot partners that they want to pull us out of danger, and are familiar enough with us to understand what might be helpful and what won’t.”

“That seems like a lot to ask of a slug.”

“Slug!” Gill trilled softly.

“It is,” FM said. “But they’re doing great at it. Aren’t you, Gill?”

“Gill!” Kimmalyn’s slug said, and immediately appeared on top of the dash in front of FM, extending itself up to peer at Gill in FM’s sling.

“Good girl, Happy,” FM said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a tin of a slimy-looking substance. The taynix eagerly ate it off her finger, despite Gill’s best efforts to nudge its way in and take some.

“That’s the other command they know,” Jorgen said. “They can recognize each other’s names and go find each other, regardless of distance. So even if Alanik didn’t want to go to Detritus to get Rig—”

“Are we learning how useless we are without the engineers again?” Sadie asked, walking up behind us with the others. “I thought we knew that already.”

“You’d think,” T-Stall—or Catnip—said. “But it turns out there is no limit to the number of times we have to learn obvious things.”

“Speak for yourself,” the other one said. “I knew it already. I was simply waiting for the rest of you to catch up.”

Arturo followed behind them with Nedd. He didn’t acknowledge me at all, as if our conversation had never happened.

It was entirely reasonable for him not to trust me. But it still *bothered* me that he didn’t, though he was justified—smart, even—in thinking I might betray them.

“Does anyone else feel...heavier here?” Nedd asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Our planets have a slight gravitational difference. I noticed that on Detritus. I don’t think it’s enough of a difference to matter.”

“It matters to my quads,” Nedd said. “I feel like I’ve been doing laps around the orchard at Alta.” He blinked at me. “You probably don’t have orchards, since you live on trees.”

“We do, actually,” I said. “We graft smaller trees into the branches of the large ones. They also grow naturally in places where the bark has disintegrated into debris.”

FM handed Kimmalyn’s taynix back to her. “I was hoping looking at the tech might spark something, since I’ve spent a lot of time listening to Rig

talk about this stuff. But no. Still don't know enough to be useful." She looked over at Jorgen. "It's possible that Command doesn't know Rig was in on us leaving. I don't want to get him in trouble."

"We could try to bring him out and then return him without anyone knowing," Jorgen said again. "We might need Alanik's help for that, though. If we use the H-O-M-E position to hyperjump in, that will be obvious. My mom might even have people staking it out, waiting for us."

"I want to go," FM says. "I can explain the situation to Rig."

"Any of us could explain the situation to Rig," Nedd said.

"Yes," FM said slowly. "But he trusts me."

"He trusts all of us, doesn't he?" Nedd said. "Except maybe Alanik. No offense, Alanik."

"Why would I take offense to that?" I asked. "It's factual."

"See?" Nedd said. "I knew I liked you."

Arturo gave Nedd a look I couldn't quite read.

"Alanik could go get Rig," Jorgen said. "And FM could go with her to explain the situation. Is that all right with you, Alanik?"

Was I willing to take someone with me when I walked onto a platform full of people who now probably considered me a criminal? "Yes, of course," I said.

"I can jump straight to Rig on my own though," FM said. "Gill is really good at finding his slug."

"I still want you to take Alanik with you," Jorgen said. "We *think* Gill will be able to get back easily, but I don't want you stranded on Detritus, facing court-martial."

"Wait," Nedd said. "Why is Gill really good at finding Rig's slug?"

"Because we've drilled them so many times," FM said. She looked a little pink, and sounded defensive.

"Okay," Nedd said. "But we've practiced with all the slugs. We've practiced so many times that I think maybe *I* could find these slugs in the nowhere—"

"You couldn't," Jorgen said.

"Leave it, Nedd," Arturo said.

“But I’m just saying—”

“I hear what you’re saying!” FM said, too loudly.

Everyone stared at her.

She sighed. “Our slugs are really good at finding each other because Rig and I are dating, and we use the slugs to visit each other so we don’t have to deal with awkward questions, because we weren’t ready to tell everyone. There. Now you know.”

“Oh,” Nedd said. He always seemed to have something to say about everything, but now he seemed abashed. Based on the reactions of the group, I guessed that Jorgen and Kimmalyn already knew, and T-Stall and Catnip didn’t care.

“Are mate-pairs taboo in your culture?” I asked. “You all seem very embarrassed to talk about them.”

“Not taboo,” FM said. “But...personal.” She looked at me. “Do the UrDail always speak openly about these things?”

“Fairly openly,” I said. “It’s definitely nothing to be embarrassed about. It can depend on your family culture, but most families are thrilled by mate-pairings, because they welcome children.”

“None of us are thinking about children,” Jorgen said, quickly.

“Can you imagine?” FM said.

I didn’t understand. “Because you’re at war? You were all born during the war, weren’t you?” Unless I drastically misunderstood human aging patterns, they would have had to be.

“Because we’re too young,” FM said. “And we’re pilots on the front lines. Not a life conducive to raising kids. A lot of our parents were pilots, but most of us had at least one parent who wasn’t flying.”

“Wait,” I said. “You’re raised by your *parents*?”

The humans all looked at me like this was a very stupid question. “Yes,” Kimmalyn said. “Who were you raised by?”

“My grandparents,” I said. “We’re encouraged to find a mate-pair young, so we can have children while our parents are still young and healthy enough to raise the children. Parents have to work to support their families. They don’t have time or energy for childcare. Besides, we only have *two* of

them, when there are at least four grandparents involved, so the odds of one of them being able to care for the children is so much higher than with parents.”

“Huh,” Sadie said. “I guess that does make sense when you put it that way.”

I was trying to picture how human parents must handle having babies while—to use FM’s example—still of age to fly in the air force. That sounded like a terrible system.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “I think the lesson here is that none of us want to talk about relationships or plan to have children in the near future, except maybe Alanik.”

“I’m not going to have a child,” I said. “I’m not in a mate-pair. But it doesn’t bother me to say so. It’s not shameful in my culture either way.”

“Well, I feel shameful,” Nedd said. “Everyone is coupled up but me! FM has a boyfriend, and Arturo is basically engaged—”

“I am *not*,” Arturo said.

“And Jorgen and Spensa—”

“Shut up, Nedd—” Jorgen said.

“Kimmalyn, do you have a boyfriend?”

Kimmalyn looked suddenly uncomfortable. “Um, *no*.”

“But seriously, it’s bad enough that I have to hang around while Arturo and Bryn are making kissy faces at each other—”

“You won’t have to do that anymore, trust me,” Arturo said.

“What?” Nedd said. “Why?”

“Because we broke up.”

Now everyone stared at Arturo. He usually had a confident air about him, but now he withered a bit.

Okay. Humans definitely got unreasonably embarrassed about relationships. It was amazing their species managed to survive.

“Seriously?” Nedd asked. He seemed much more concerned now. “When did that happen?”

“A few days ago. She wrote me a letter. But I thought we established that none of us wanted to talk about relationships. Can we please change the

subject?”

“Stars, please,” Jorgen said.

“The question is,” FM said, “do we think Rig’s help with the platform will be beneficial enough that we’re willing to ask him to risk a military trial with the rest of us?”

“If it was a military trial, we’d be cleared,” Jorgen said. “Because Cobb is our military leader, and he told us to go. It would have to be a civil trial for us to be convicted, and they can’t try us civilly because all we did was disobey orders, which isn’t a violation of civilian law.”

“And we stole starships,” Kimmalyn reminded him.

“Which are military property!” Jorgen said. “Also should be tried by the DDF. No defection, no grand larceny.”

Everyone looked skeptical, including Jorgen, but if it helped him feel better I didn’t see any harm in leaving him to his faulty logic.

“You disobeyed your mother,” Nedd said. “What do you think she’s going to do to you for that?”

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “But at least the rest of you are off the hook there.”

“I’d like my ship,” I said. “Otherwise we’ll have one fewer pilot in the air. If we brought it here with Rig, could he finish reassembling it?” After my last experience in a human vessel, I’d take my own ship back as long as it flew.

“I bet he’d do it,” FM said. “He felt really bad that he’d dismantled it and then you needed it.”

“I think the biggest question,” Arturo said, “is what are our *other* options?”

Everyone was quiet.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “The rest of us will stay here and see if we can find a place where the platform is built to interface with the taynix.”

“Interface with them?” I asked.

“If this platform has hypercomm or hyperdrive technology, it will probably have taynix boxes,” FM said. “Like the one in the broken Superiority ship.”

“We’ll look for the boxes while you’re gone,” Jorgen said, “and then Rig can help us figure it out when he gets here.”

I hoped we wouldn’t be gone long enough for them to do much searching. Going to get Rig and my ship should be an in-and-out kind of mission.

But these things rarely worked out that simply.

“All right,” I said. “Are we ready?”

FM scritchd Gill on the head. “Let me take us,” she said. “Gill needs the practice.”

I was a bit leery of jetting around the universe at the whims of a slug, but the humans seemed certain this would work. Besides, I’d wanted to learn the secrets to hyperdrive technology. This was my chance to see one in action.

“Okay,” I said. FM stood beside me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Scud, I hope he’s not in the shower or something,” she said.

“Or in a meeting with Command,” Jorgen said.

“Or that. Gill,” FM said. “Take me to Drape.”

“Drape!” the slug trilled cheerfully.

It took all my concentration not to fight the pull of the negative realm as I was sucked into it by a force completely out of my control.

## Fourteen

I was unprepared for how it would feel to hover in the negative realm while the eyes fixed their penetrating stares elsewhere. Normally I had their full attention, but this time I was beneath their notice. It was a relief to hide, but it also felt a little insulting.

We emerged in a hallway of the humans' platform immediately in front of Rig, who screamed.

"Scud!" he shouted. "That is *terrifying* when I'm not expecting it."

"Shh!" FM said, and she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the nearest room. I took a look up and down the empty hall, then followed them. Into a storage closet from the look of it. There didn't appear to be any alternate exits, but I supposed we could hyperjump out if we needed to.

"I thought you said you do that a lot," I whispered at FM. "I didn't expect him to be so *loud*."

"Usually we arrange it beforehand," Rig said. "Also, you *told* her we do that a lot?"

"It was Nedd's fault," FM said.

"Um, okay," Rig said. "Well, hi. You should know there's a warrant out for your immediate arrest. I could be held in contempt simply for talking to you."

I'd *thought* Jorgen's justifications sounded like a stretch. FM gripped Rig's arm, and they stood close together. And I stood unfortunately close to them, because there wasn't a lot of room between the shelves of...packaged algae strips, it looked like. We must be near their kitchen facilities.

"We need your help on ReDawn," FM said. "We found something. A platform that used to move around the planet but now is in disrepair. It seems similar to the ones we have here, but we don't really know what we're looking at. Or how to use it."



“So you decided to pop into the middle of the hallway? In a place where you’re *wanted* for *desertion*?”

“Is it only desertion?” FM asked. “We were worried they’d charge us with defection.”

“Also grand larceny,” I said. “For stealing eight starships.”

“Nine,” FM said. “Including yours.”

“I’m not sure they’ve *decided* what they’re going to officially charge you with. But it seems like a problem for you to get arrested for *any* of it.”

This was all beside the point. “Are you willing to come to ReDawn to help us with the platform?” I asked.

Rig blinked at me. “Am I willing to—”

“Come with us to look at the platform,” FM said. “If no one sees us leave, you might be able to come back without anyone knowing you were helping us.”

“Except I’d also like to take my ship,” I reminded her.

“Right,” FM said. “Well, you could tell them we kidnapped you or something.”

“And add that to our list of crimes,” I added.

Rig stared at us with wide eyes. “I’ll help you. But you should know, there’s a lot going on here too. Cobb and Jeshua met with some representatives from the Superiority.”

That was right. Cobb gave that as his reason for not wanting us to return to Detritus with the Independence flight. “Have they returned?” I asked.

Rig nodded. “It was a quick meeting. They used a hyperdrive to meet at a ship right outside the shield and exchanged terms. Then they came back, and they’ve been discussing what they want to do. I think they might be talking over the hypercomm to the Superiority people now.”

“Hold on,” I said, reaching into the negative realm, searching for nearby voices.

—*understand your concerns*— said a voice I didn’t recognize. —*danger to themselves and others—learn proper safety measures to prevent disaster—send your cytonics to us for training—*

“They’re asking your leaders to send your cytonics to the Superiority,” I said. “They’ve tried to get us to do the same thing on ReDawn, first by asking, and then by threatening us. I think Quilan believes he’ll have proven himself if he delivers me personally, and that if he does the Superiority will leave him and the other cytonics alone.”

“Jorgen’s parents aren’t considering that, are they?” FM asked Rig. “Turning their *own son* over to the Superiority?”

“My own parents argued I might be *better off* being trained by the Superiority,” I said. “You’d be surprised what people will believe.”

“Is it possible that *would* be better?” Rig asked. “We’re in the dark when it comes to cytonic potential. You can obviously do a lot more than Jorgen can, and the Superiority cytonics might know even more.”

“They do,” I said. “But they aren’t going to help you, no matter what they say.”

“I can see the assembly considering it though,” FM said. “Believing that trading a couple of lives to end the war would be an acceptable sacrifice. Risking a few to save so many. That’s what we all signed up for, isn’t it? They might see it as no worse than letting their son join the DDF, and the potential for peace...”

I held my breath. I’d told them over and over what I thought about making peace with the Superiority. They already knew what I had to say. As I listened, I picked out another voice over the hypercomm. Jeshua Weight. —*assurances that no harm will come to them*—

—*valuable*, the alien voice said. *Never be so aggressive as to*—

—*aggressive enough to exterminate us*—

—*work with us, you have nothing to fear—turn over your hyperdrives, and*—

“The Superiority representatives say they won’t hurt the cytonics,” I said. Which might be true, but sending them away was still a terrible idea. “And Cobb was right. They want you to turn over the taynix too.”

“We can’t do that,” FM said. “Right?”

“Right?” Drape said, and Rig put a hand on his spines.

“They’re trying to imprison you here,” I said. “It’s what they do. Keep you isolated on your planet unless you play by their rules.”

“That’s what they’ve always done to us,” Rig said. “Ever since our fleet crashed here.”

“But this time we have the power to leave,” FM said. “We can’t give that up without risking that they’ll go back to trying to exterminate us. The shield stops them for now—”

“But not forever,” Rig said. “That’s true.”

“And we’re not giving up the taynix,” FM said. “No matter what.”

—*negotiate. We would of course need assurances that—if we are to cooperate—*

Human or UrDail, politicians were all the same. “It sounds like they’re thinking about it.”

“I meant *us*,” FM said. “*We* aren’t giving them up. The politicians will have to come to ReDawn and *take* them from us.”

I smiled. “I’d climb that tree with you.”

“I imagine Cobb will too,” Rig said. “He can’t be in favor of this.”

—*your generous offer—* another voice said over the hypercomm. Admiral Cobb, I thought. —*need time to collect the taynix—transport them to you and continue our negotiations—*

“Um,” I said. “It sounds like he’s also considering it.”

“Seriously?” Rig said.

FM shook her head. “We should get more of the taynix out while we still can.”

“We can’t take them if we aren’t ordered to,” Rig said. “We’d need to talk to Cobb.”

“Cobb says he’s in favor of sending them to the Superiority!” FM said. “If that’s true, he won’t help.”

“He might be saying that for optics,” Rig said. “Maybe he’d be glad to have an opportunity to send them away so they *can’t* be turned over.”

“He can only do that so many times,” I said, “before your politicians will catch on.”

“That’s true,” FM said. “Maybe we should take them ourselves, without asking.”

Rig looked at FM in alarm, but he didn’t argue with her.

“Where would we find them?” I asked.

“The ones that can hyperjump are all over the platform,” Rig said. “We have most of them partnered with pilots. Some of the hypercomm and mindblade slugs are kept in Engineering, but it’s crawling with people right now.”

So we wouldn’t be able to pull them all out without alerting people to our presence. “I think we should get my ship and get out of here as soon as possible. Is it capable of flight?”

“Not right now,” Rig said. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had time to—”

“Can you fix it on ReDawn?” I asked. If not, we’d need to take another human ship. When it was time for us to make our move, I wanted all the Independence pilots in the air with us.

“Yes,” Rig said. “Given a few hours, I could put it together again.”

“What else is the Superiority saying?” FM asked.

I’d been distracted from the transmission, but I focused on it again.

*—meeting to assure you of our intentions—do what is best for your species and the intergalactic interests—*

“They’re setting up another meeting,” I said. “Probably to turn over taynix, I’m guessing.”

“What about Gran-Gran?” Rig asked.

“Who?” I said.

“Becca Nightshade. Spensa’s grandmother. If the Superiority is really asking them to turn over the cytonics, she might be in danger.”

“Would you like me to contact her?” I asked.

“We should at least warn her,” FM said. “Maybe we should take her with us.”

I paused, reaching toward the planet below. *Into* the planet, beneath the surface, through the underground caverns where the humans lived.

A voice reached out to meet me.

*Alanik?* it said.

So she'd heard of me. I spent so long unconscious on this platform, it made sense.

Yes, I said. *Your government is considering a deal to turn their cytonics over to the Superiority. Do you need us to rescue you?*

What followed wasn't words exactly, but a strong sense of reluctance. *Detritus is not our home*, Gran-Gran said. *But these are my people. I won't abandon them.*

Jorgen left to help me, so I felt the need to defend him. *Jorgen didn't abandon them*, I said. *He's gone for help. You could come with us.*

I didn't know Gran-Gran, but I wasn't about to let an old woman to be given over to the Superiority. Besides, we could use another cytonic. The more we had on our side, the more we evened the playing field with Unity.

*They are coming for you*, Gran-Gran said. *You need to go.*

*Who?* I asked. Quilan and the other UrDail cytonics couldn't hyperjump, but the Superiority cytonics could.

Did they know we were here?

*Go*, Gran-Gran said. *A warrior fights. She does not yield, and she does not abandon her people.*

I nodded. "She wants to stay here," I said. "She knows they might try to use her as a bargaining chip, but she won't abandon Detritus."

"Is that a good idea?" FM asked.

"If it's Gran-Gran's idea, you won't talk her out of it," Rig said.

"I can respect her decision," I said. "But she says they're coming for us. I don't know who, but we need to go."

"I still think we should try to get more of the slugs out before we go," FM said. "There are dozens of them here with the other pilots."

"The entire military isn't going to desert," Rig said. "We'd only put ourselves in danger trying to convince them."

"Jorgen can get them to answer him, right?" I asked. "What if I called them to come to me? Do you think they'd do it?"

"Depends," Rig said. "They might be attached enough to their pilots to stay. They'd be more likely to come if you promised them something like caviar."

“I have a little,” FM said. “Not enough to feed them all. If you promise them caviar and we don’t deliver, that’s bad for their training, but not as bad as being *given* to the *Superiority*.”

I grabbed a large box of algae strips on the shelf. “We could bring these. The people on Wandering Leaf are going to be getting hungry, so we should probably bring some for them anyway.”

“Good idea,” Rig said, and he picked up a jug of a white substance.

“Custard,” FM said. “Kimmalyn will be happy.”

“If I’m going to try to call the slugs, it’ll draw attention,” I said. “We should do it from the ship, so we can leave immediately afterward.”

Rig looked at FM, as if to ask if we were actually doing this.

“I think you should,” FM said to me. “I don’t feel good about leaving them here, even with their pilots, when we don’t know if the other flights will defend them.”

“They probably won’t,” Rig said. “The assembly has come down pretty hard on you guys for what you did, and Cobb has had to go along with it.”

“All right,” I said. “I can jump us to my ship in the landing bay.”

I pulled us through the negative realm beneath those strangely distracted eyes. We were only going a short distance, but space didn’t work the same in there. If we were dealing in relative distances we should have spent a much shorter time in the negative realm compared to when we jumped from ReDawn, yet we hung there for a moment and then emerged out the other side in the large hangar next to my disassembled ship. Through a large skylight, I could see the platforms above and snatches of the sparkling shield that encased the planet.

“You’re sure you can make it fly again?” I asked Rig quietly.

“It’ll take me a bit,” Rig said, “but yes, I can.”

“It’s got a better chance of working than the one you left with last time,” FM added.

“Last time!” Gill trilled, and FM shushed him.

“Wait, what happened to that one?” Rig whispered.

“They’re here somewhere,” a voice said from the edge of the landing bay. “Find them.”

FM and Rig huddled closer together under the wing, the containers of food tucked up by their knees.

“That’s Cobb,” Rig whispered.

And so it was. Had Spensa’s grandmother alerted him? She hadn’t wanted to abandon her people, but she’d sounded like she wanted us to keep fighting.

No, it was probably the Superiority. One of their cytonics might have warned them of our arrival and then noticed us hyperjumping to the landing pad.

“Alanik,” FM whispered. “The slugs.”

We might be able to count on Cobb to cover for us for a moment, but not for long. Whatever cytonic was watching would be able to feel me calling for the slugs, but if I hyperjumped out fast enough they wouldn’t be able to stop me.

I gave FM a sharp nod, pressed my back to the lower part of my fuselage, and reached out across the base.

There were a *lot* of those tiny minds. Dozens at least. As I reached toward them, they turned to me as if curious.

I could work with that. I wasn’t sure how much language the slugs understood, but in the negative realm all communication was reduced to thoughts, which anyone could understand. Still, I didn’t want to get too complicated. *Friend*, I sent to them. They obviously understood that concept, given how attached they were to each other and to their pilots. And this was a concept every living being responded to: *Food*.

I could feel them answering me, some of them hungrier than others, all of them searching for a social connection like it was the thing they longed for most. These things had relationships with each other long before the humans captured them, I realized, but they saw the humans not as kidnappers but as a joyous addition to their family.

Many of them didn’t want to leave.

Footsteps approached as Cobb’s people spread out across the hangar. It wasn’t going to take them long to find us here. I didn’t have much time.

*More family*, I told them, sending them images of Rig and FM and Jorgen.

That intrigued them. They knew and liked all three of them, and wanted to see them again.

More boots clicking on the metal surface of the platform. Movement over the edge of the wing, and then...

"We have to go," Rig whispered.

*Come*, I called to the taynix.

And then Cobb appeared, several paces away. His eyes fixed on us under the wing.

And half a dozen taynix popped into existence at our feet.

FM and Rig reached forward, grabbing the slugs, while Cobb's jaw dropped.

"They're here!" he shouted.

No. Not covering for us. The opposite of that. We probably should have expected that, given that we were stealing his military's hyperdrives without permission.

More slugs appeared—maybe as many as a dozen now.

Cobb strode toward us, like he was about to yank us out from beneath the wing.

It might have been for show, but he didn't *have* to alert them to our presence, did he?

I wasn't going to stay here and find out. I reached into the negative realm, toward Wandering Leaf and the rest of the humans. With the ship to my back and my shoulder pressed against FM, I *pulled*, and the landing bay disappeared.



# Fifteen

We emerged from the negative realm in the hangar on Wandering Leaf, which was empty of both humans and UrDail.

“That never gets less terrifying,” Rig said.

“And disorienting,” FM said. “And we don’t even see the creepy eyes.”

“Be glad for that,” I said. I reached out again, searching for Jorgen’s mind. I found him and the taynix belonging to the other flight members. They hadn’t gone far.

“Why did Cobb come after us like that?” FM asked. “He didn’t even try to talk to us. Maybe Jeshua is watching him too closely?”

“Maybe,” Rig said. “Cobb played along with everything they said after you left. If I hadn’t been there when he gave you the order to go, I never would have thought he’d done it.”

“Done it!” one of the slugs said.

Cobb was far away now, and whatever Superiority cytonic had been tracking us either couldn’t or didn’t follow.

That felt more ominous than anything.

“At least we saved these guys,” FM said, cuddling the slugs. “Though I don’t imagine their pilots are happy with us.”

“Happy!” one of the slugs trilled. And then several of them disappeared.

We all climbed out from beneath the wing, FM and Rig hauling the case of algae and the jug of custard with them.

“This way,” I said, leading FM and Rig toward the others.

We found them several sections down from the hangar, gathered around an arched open doorway. Most of the flight sat outside with two crates open in front of them. Jorgen was inside, while Arturo leaned in the doorframe, watching the others dubiously.

“Rig!” Kimmalyn said, waving furiously. Several of the new slugs were gathered around her and Happy.

“Hey, everybody,” Rig said.

“Look!” Sadie said, waving a half-wrapped wafer bar at us. “We found their old food supplies!”

“The *centuries-old* food supplies?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Nedd said. “I can’t read the labels on these, but there’s no way this stuff is that old. We took some to your friends, and they said thank you. They wouldn’t have done that if we were offering them two-hundred-year-old food, would they?”

I approached, looking at the boxes. “I think you’re right. That looks like some salvager’s food stash.” The wafer bars were individually wrapped, and the outer box did bear the date of origin. “Looks like they’re only five years old.”

“Delicious,” Arturo said.

“This one *is* delicious!” Sadie said. “It has some kind of nuts in it.” She looked at me wide-eyed. “Those aren’t poisonous to humans or anything, are they?”

“I have no idea what humans find poisonous,” I said. “Though your people used to live among us on ReDawn and ate our food, so most of it is probably safe to eat. The nuts are called udal nuts. They grow on bushy plants that live in the crevices of the branches. They’re quite good, though I can’t vouch for these bars.” I pulled one out and unwrapped it. It was more crumbly than usual, probably owing to its age, but at least it hadn’t molded.

“Maybe we should have been more careful,” Sadie said, scowling at her nut wafer as she set it down.

“It’s all right, Sadie,” Nedd said. “I’m on my third bar. If you die, I’m going with you.”

Sadie did not look comforted.

“We brought you food,” FM said, lifting the case of algae strips. “So you don’t have to rely on scavenged nut bars.”

“Oh, custard!” Kimmalyn said, taking the jug from Rig. “Thanks!”

“You also brought more slugs,” Jorgen said, joining Arturo in the doorway. “Why?”

“It’s a long story,” FM said.

“How long could it be?” Jorgen asked. “You were gone ten minutes tops.”

“They were only gone for ten minutes,” Sadie said, “and we *still* managed to find the taynix boxes while they were gone.” She and Catnip—or T-Stall? I really needed to figure out which was which—slapped their palms together in what I assumed must be a human gesture of celebration.

“Seriously?” FM said. “You found them that quickly?”

“It wasn’t hard,” Kimmalyn said. “We found a station map of the platform in that engineering room written in English. The control room was labeled on it.”

“Shhhhh,” T-Stall or Catnip said. “You could have let them think we were *amazing*.”

“We *are* amazing,” Sadie said. “Amazing at reading maps.”

“I want to see this,” Rig said, and FM set down the box of algae strips at Sadie’s feet and followed Rig and me into the room with Jorgen. The new blue taynix sat on the control panel, and trilled at FM when she walked in.

One wall was dominated by panels and levers and switches, with a wide window above the panels looking over the edge of the platform into the miasma. All around the room, mounted against the walls, were metal boxes like the one in Jorgen’s ship.

“Do they all have holoprojectors?” FM asked. “Because if so we could strip those, since we don’t need them for the slugs anymore.”

Rig knelt down and looked at the wires beneath the panel. “Looks like it’s been looted already. But most of the wiring is intact. The wires themselves must not be worth much on this planet.”

“Why would they be?” I asked. “They’re wires.”

“Depends on whether you have the resources to mine the right metals,” Rig said. “Some of those are valuable on Detritus.”

That made sense. The core of ReDawn was rich with metals, which was why the Superiority bothered with us to begin with. They wanted our resources, and we traded them away for the barest recognition of our dignity, instead of remembering we were in the position of power.

“Taynix are valuable too,” Jorgen said. “Seriously, where did those come from?”

“We brought them with us,” FM said, “because the Superiority wants to take them.”

“Did you talk to Cobb?” Jorgen asked.

“No,” FM said. “Cobb and Jeshua were talking to the Superiority over the hypercomm. They’ve already met with the Superiority once, and the Superiority was asking for them to turn over our cytonics and our hyperdrives.”

“FM,” Jorgen said. “Please tell me you didn’t steal the taynix.”

“We didn’t *steal* them,” FM snapped. “We *rescued* them. Alanik called to them and they came of their own free will.”

“They’re hyperdrives!” Jorgen said. “Not people. Cobb ordered us to come here, but he *didn’t* ask us to take the slugs that were commissioned to *other pilots*—”

FM narrowed her eyes. “Sometimes you have to do the right thing, Jorgen. Even if Command says to do something else.”

“*Okay*,” Jorgen said in a low voice. “But you were gone *a few minutes*, FM. You didn’t think this through. You didn’t talk to Cobb, and for all we know he has a plan that depends on the hyperdrives! You can’t do this.” He looked from me to Rig. “Why did you help her?”

“Um,” Rig said.

I didn’t have any more of an answer. Arturo was watching me, and I wasn’t about to admit that having more hyperdrives on ReDawn seemed like a good idea to me. Arturo wasn’t an idiot, and neither was Jorgen. They were probably already putting that together.

“It needed to be done,” FM said. “Even if they weren’t *living beings* that have *feelings*—”

“The other pilots are *human* beings,” Jorgen said. “And you left them without a tool they could use to *survive*, FM. Besides, the fact that the slugs *let* you do this is not good. If they’ll respond to Alanik, who they *don’t know*, it means enemy cytonics could use the same tactic against us.”

“And clearly we need to train that out of them,” FM said. “But this time it was a good thing because—”

“This is not a good thing!” Jorgen said. “Coming here when Cobb gave us sort-of orders to do so was one thing, but this is entirely out of the chain of command, *and* you didn’t think it through *or consult me* before you did it. You could have had Alanik contact me. We could have had a *conversation* about it—”

FM closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. “You’re right, okay? It was rash. But we’re not sending them back. Not while *your mother* is considering taking them to the Superiority. That doesn’t even make good *tactical* sense, Jorgen, and you know it.”

“But *you* don’t make the tactical decisions,” Jorgen said. “You don’t know what the bigger plan is.”

“The bigger plan may be to give the taynix to the Superiority!” FM said. “I’m not going to let them do that. And if *you* are, then you are not my flightleader.”

Rig and Arturo both stared wide-eyed at FM, like she’d said something horrific. FM looked down at the floor, her hands shaking. “I didn’t mean that,” she said quietly.

Jorgen stared at FM, his mouth set in an angry line. Rig and Arturo exchanged a concerned look, and outside the control room the rest of the flight had fallen silent.

“Fine,” Jorgen said, setting his jaw. “We’ll keep them here for now. Though I imagine there are going to be a lot of pilots who are *not thrilled* with us for *stealing their taynix*.”

“We’ll return them when the situation is safe,” FM said through gritted teeth.

Right. Of course they would. They had no intention of sharing with *us*.

I couldn’t let the humans leave here with all the slugs. Even *one* could change everything for ReDawn. But they weren’t making noise about leaving now, so this wasn’t the moment to worry about it. Not when I still had hope they might help me.

“Okay,” Rig said. “If the taynix are staying, maybe we should figure out how they interface with this platform.”

FM looked like she wanted to flee the room, and Jorgen looked like he wanted to punch someone, but they both nodded.

“Good idea,” Arturo said.

“All right then,” Rig said. He squeezed FM’s shoulder and then moved over to one of the boxes on the wall. “The boxes themselves weren’t stripped. Makes sense, if the people here don’t know the secrets to hyperdrives.”

“We found something weird on that map,” Arturo said. “There was a control room and the autoturret systems, of course. But no engines and no navigation systems. Alanik said this platform used to move, but there doesn’t seem to be any way to move it, at least not on the schematics we found.”

“Interesting,” Rig said. “Maybe it requires a hyperdrive to move? Get me something to stand on so I can get a look above the boxes and see how they’re interfaced with the platform.”

Everything useful in this room that wasn’t screwed down appeared to have been looted, but T-Stall and Catnip hauled in a chunk of metal that was tall enough for Rig to boost himself up. While they did, Kimmalyn slipped into the room with us and linked her arm through FM’s. She and Jorgen were both still silent. Jorgen leaned against the wall opposite FM with his arms crossed, and FM actively avoided looking at him. It was an improvement over the yelling. The more they fought, the more I worried they’d decide ReDawn wasn’t worth the trouble. Though if that happened, perhaps I could convince FM to stay and keep the taynix with her. Jorgen was their cytonic, so he could influence the slugs to go with him.

But as we’d discovered, he wasn’t the only one.

Rig stared at the debris as Catnip and T-Stall deposited it on the floor. “Is that a piece of a starfighter wing?”

“Yep,” one of them said.

“Is it a piece of one of *our* starfighter wings?” Rig asked.

“I had a little trouble with the landing,” I said, and the other one snickered.

Rig looked at me like he wondered how I was still alive. “We’ll tell you all about it later,” Jorgen said. “Right now we need to know what the taynix can do if we interface them with the platform.”

Rig boosted himself up on the wing, first knocking on the wall and then swinging open a panel to reveal a circuit board.

“This all looks like it’s intact,” Rig said. “Either it’s not valuable, or the salvagers didn’t know it was here. The holoprojectors would have been much more recognizable.” Rig climbed down again. “These boxes are labeled underneath, but not in English. Alanik?”

I had to lean over the control panel and crane my neck upward to see the labels. They were in neither English nor my own language, but Mandarin. “This box says it’s for the weapons system,” I said. “But that doesn’t make sense, does it? The weapons systems aren’t cytonic.”

Rig and Jorgen exchanged a look.

“The autoturrets aren’t,” Arturo said. “But the map had those facilities in another location. Are there...cytonic weapons systems?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I’ve never heard of that.”

Still, while the writing on the boxes was a bit antiquated, the meaning was clear. The next few boxes were for the comms system. On the opposite wall I found one with a different label. “This one is for the navigation system.”

“So it does have a hyperdrive,” FM said.

Rig nodded. “There’s only one spot for a navigation slug, and several for the hypercomm. Probably so you could have commlinks open with many people at once. It only takes one slug to move the platform.”

I examined the boxes along the third wall. “These are for the defense systems.”

“Could be a shield like the one back home,” Rig said. “That would be useful. Though I don’t know how that would work, because on Detritus the platforms combine to become the shield, and the shield mechanism doesn’t

require a taynix.” He turned to me. “Do you know how this platform was used in the past? Was it part of a larger system?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The Superiority doesn’t like us teaching the details of our military history. Rinakin taught me some things, but most of our education is limited to being told we were wrong to fight.”

“You don’t believe that though,” FM said. “Why not, if that’s what you were taught?”

“Do you believe everything you’re told?” I asked.

“No,” FM said. “But it’s hard for most people to ignore the dominant messaging sometimes, especially when no one is willing to speak against it.”

“Oh,” I said. “No, the official curriculum is tailored to make us look good for the Superiority, but there has always been turmoil on ReDawn as to whose ideas are the best. There is no shortage of differing opinions here.”

“That must be so confusing,” Rig said.

“Sometimes,” I said. “But it’s also liberating. With so many different ideas, it’s easier to choose what to believe. Unity would like us to all unite under one set of beliefs, one agreement about what is best. But that takes away our knowledge, reduces our ability to decide what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“So you need each other’s ideas to really be free,” FM said. “I like that idea.”

I didn’t feel like we needed Unity, but maybe that was true. Maybe if Independence won we’d do the same, simplifying what we taught to make us always in the right. Maybe the tension between us was what truly allowed the conversation to happen.

If we wanted to maintain that tension, I needed to make sure the Independents survived.

Jorgen still stood to the side with his arms folded. I couldn’t tell what he thought, and I didn’t think he’d appreciate being called out in front of the others after his confrontation with FM.

*You disagree with this idea?* I asked in his mind.

*No,* Jorgen said. *But I agree with Rig that it sounds confusing.*



“Let’s try the cytonic defense systems now,” Jorgen said to Rig. “If we can inhibit the platform or turn on the shield, we’ll buy ourselves more time.”

Rig nodded and extended his hand to the blue slug, who seemed to sniff it even though it didn’t have a visible nose. After giving the slug a moment to acclimate to him, he picked it up and set it gently into one of the defense systems boxes and closed the door.

Nothing happened.

“What are you supposed to do now?” I asked. “Ask it to do something?”

“I don’t know what to ask it to do,” Jorgen said. “I can’t give it an image of an inhibitor. It doesn’t *look* like anything.”

“Maybe you could try to show it an image of a cytonic approaching us, let it know what we’re afraid of.”

“We’re not going back to scaring the slugs into submission,” FM said.

“Right,” Rig said. “But there’s a difference between frightening them and communicating with them. You could, like, *explain* the situation?”

Jorgen looked doubtful, but FM nodded and went back to staring at the floor.

“All right,” Jorgen said. “I’ll try to...explain.” He closed his eyes, and I listened in the negative realm, trying to hear what he was communicating.

There were no words here, only ideas. Jorgen showed the slug his own fear, and then a picture of a cytonic emerging in the control room. I could feel the slug’s own fear—it didn’t like the way it had been treated by cytonics in the past.

By the branches. These things *were* intelligent.

Still, the slug didn’t do anything.

“Can you ask it to protect us?” I asked. They said the slugs understood abstract concepts like danger...

Jorgen sent an image, almost like a request. An impression of the platform being shut off to outside cytonics.

Arturo’s slug made a squeaking noise and then the universe around me stopped vibrating, as if the whole of it had suddenly died. It was gone—my ability to reach out, to find the others, to reach the whispering voices that

told me I wasn't alone. Maybe that was what Jorgen meant when he said Spensa could hear the stars. It wasn't so much stars I could hear, but all the matter in the whole of space and time.

And now they were gone.

Jorgen looked as disoriented as I felt. Boomslug had his face buried beneath Jorgen's arm, and Snuggles lay deflated in the sling across his chest. Gill huddled around FM's shoulders.

"I can't hear them anymore," Jorgen said. "It worked, but—if we can't use our own powers, we can't keep track of the enemy, or listen in on them." He turned to me. "How did we do that on Detritus? Some kind of impression?"

"There should be a code that lets us use cytonics while we're within the inhibitor. I don't know how you got it back on Detritus, but you did. Maybe because your powers manifested there, you grew up with the code in your mind?"

"That would explain how the taynix got it too," FM said.

"There might be a key here somewhere," Rig said. He leaned over the control panel. "There are some recordings in the database, but they seem to be blank."

"Play them," I said.

"Sure," Rig said, and he fiddled with some of the buttons.

An impression pushed into my mind like a key being slipped under a door. I concentrated on it, committing it to my memory, and the world began to vibrate around me again like a chorus of insects beginning to chirp again after a windstorm.

"Stars," Jorgen said. "That's better."

"Better," Gill and Boomslug both agreed, their voices forming a strange harmony.

I reached out, finding the minds of the slugs farther away on the platform, and I offered the impression to them. I could feel each of their relief.

"That should give us some cover," Rig said. "I can work on getting the shield up and spend some time fixing Alanik's ship so she's battle ready."

Then we can try out the weapons systems and the hyperdrive.”

“All right,” Jorgen said. “That seems like a good plan.”

“We think we can use the slugs to move the platform,” Arturo said. “But what will we do with it if we can?”

“It’s a large and powerful tool,” I said. “But not the stealthiest, to be sure. If we start moving the platform around, Unity will take notice. We need to figure out a way to use the distraction to save Rinakin.”

“We’re assuming he wants to be saved,” FM said. She turned to Rig. “We want to rescue her friend, but we heard him over the radio saying he was defecting to the other side.”

“Wonder what that would feel like,” Rig said.

I imagined they felt very similarly, having their commander try to capture them after sending them away. I hoped there was a reasonable explanation.

FM looked nervously at Jorgen. “There’s more,” she said. “Cobb sent people after us when we went to get Alanik’s ship. They knew we were there somehow, and Cobb saw us himself. I thought maybe he’d cover for us, but he didn’t. He called the people who were with him right to us.”

“Maybe he did that because he knew we’d escape anyway,” Rig said. “He knew Alanik could get us out.”

“Still,” FM said, “he could have given us a few more seconds.”

“He might have noticed you were ‘rescuing’ taynix,” Jorgen said.

“Yeah,” Rig said. “That probably didn’t help.” He looked down at the instrumentation and sighed. “As for how we could use the platform, I want to take a look at these other systems and get a better idea of what we’re dealing with. Then we can talk about ways we might use it.”

“That will all take some time,” Jorgen said, stepping away to peer out the window into the miasma. “It’s getting late. At least, it is on Detritus. What time does night fall here?”

I wasn’t exactly sure. I looked out the window at the angle of the sun through the miasma. “In about three sleep cycles, I think.”

“Interesting,” Rig said. “You sleep multiple times in a day?”

“Yes,” I said. “One day is equal to nine sleep cycles at this time of year on the tree where I live. Sometimes it will be less or more, depending on the location of a given tree in the miasma. I’m not sure what it’ll be here, but judging by the angle of the sun that’s my estimation.”

“So a day here is about a week,” Jorgen said. “We grew up underground, so our days are manufactured as well. Even if it isn’t going to get dark we still need to sleep, and eat something that won’t kill us.” He looked grudgingly at FM. “Thanks for bringing the algae strips.”

“It was Alanik’s idea,” FM said.

“It’s a good thing Nedd gorged himself on those nut bars,” Arturo said. “Might be some algae strips left for the rest of us.”

“Though I hope he doesn’t keel over,” Kimmalyn added.

“I’ll get to work,” Rig said. “We can rest and then return to the plan.”

“Sounds good,” Jorgen said, and he stalked out, leaving the rest of us behind.

## Sixteen

As Jorgen left the room, FM appeared to deflate.

“You okay?” Kimmalyn asked her.

“Yeah,” FM said. “I really shouldn’t have said that to Jorgen.”

“Definitely not,” Rig said. “But I understand why you did.”

“I need to walk,” FM said. “I’ll show you that other control room. There might be systems for the shield in there.” She and Rig left, heading in the opposite direction from Jorgen. Kimmalyn followed them, telling the rest of the flight that they needed to check in with the Independence pilots and see if they’d found somewhere we could all be comfortable for the night.

They wandered off, taking most of the slugs and the food with them. Arturo remained behind.

“Are they always like this?” I asked.

“FM and Jorgen?” Arturo said. “No, not like that.”

That wasn’t much of a comfort, but as they all seemed committed to seeing this through, I supposed I should leave their internal politics alone.

Arturo watched me quietly.

I sighed. “You still think I’m going to betray you?” I asked.

“I hope you aren’t,” he said. He didn’t seem upset about it either way. Merely uncertain.

“You could also betray *me*,” I insisted. “You could promise the Superiority you’ll bring me in, use me and my people as a bargaining chip to get yourselves a better position the way Quilan is doing.”

“We could,” Arturo said. He seemed surprised, like he hadn’t thought of that.

I hadn’t meant to give him any ideas. They’d be heroes, enough that their commanders might forget about their court-martial. Their admiral could claim this was his plan all along. That was what our Council would do in such a situation.

“But we won’t,” Arturo said. “We’ve come all this way to secure an alliance. Those are our orders.”

They were not-orders, as I recalled. But I wasn’t going to mention that.

“Thank you,” I said. Arturo nodded, but we both watched each other uneasily.

I waited for him to leave, but he kept standing there. Did he not want to leave me alone in this room? Did he think I would *sabotage* it somehow? “You don’t have to watch me every minute,” I said.

“I know,” Arturo said. He seemed surprised again, like the idea hadn’t occurred to him. “I was just wondering why you’re doing this.”

I blinked at him. “Trying to rescue my friend?”

“Fighting the Superiority,” he said. “When you described it back on Detritus, it sounded like your lives are good here.”

“They are,” I said. “And I’d like to keep it that way.”

“So if your people joined the Superiority, what do you think would be worse?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. It was hard for me to imagine exactly what that would be like. Giving in to the Superiority felt like the worst thing that could possibly happen, but on the surface I could see how it would look attractive to the humans after the years of war and terror.

“I don’t think they’d try to exterminate us,” I said carefully. “If they were going to do that, they would have done it years ago, after we lost the last war.”

“Okay,” Arturo said.

“But I think they would oppress us.”

“And they’re not oppressing you now?” Arturo asked.

“No, they are,” I said quickly. “They withhold the secrets of hyperdrives from us, try to control how we use cytonics, tell us what aspects of our culture are ‘lesser’ or ‘advanced.’”

“Do you really want to fight a war with them just because they’re critical of you and refuse to share?”

“It’s not that,” I said. “They actively try to stop us from learning. They tell us that wireless technology is dangerous, that cytonics are dangerous—

but they became a powerful civilization through the use of those same resources. By denying us access—it's not only that they won't help us, it's like they walked through the door and then locked it behind them."

Arturo nodded. "Still," he said, "what do you need that technology for, if you want nothing to do with them? Wouldn't that be the only reason you'd need it? To interact with them?"

"We need it to *fight* them," I said. "Because we don't want to be under their control. Because we're not 'lesser.' We're intelligent, and we have a right to direct our own lives and our own future. We're not trying to take over from the Superiority. We only want to exist without their interference and their...*judgment*."

Arturo nodded. I got the feeling he wasn't arguing with me. He was trying to understand. "And that's worth it to you," he said. "To risk war, to risk them deciding to exterminate you after all. To risk your life and the lives of everyone you love, the lives of your whole *people*. To avoid being judged by them."

"It's not only that they judge us," I said. It was so hard to define, but I felt the resistance to everything the Superiority stood for like it was a part of me. "It's that they judge us and find us *wanting*. And if we cooperate with them, it's like we're admitting they're right. That we *are* lesser. And we're *not*. We are equal beings who deserve to be treated as equals. And I would rather risk everything than capitulate, because I can't deny that to myself. It would kill me to do it."

Arturo met my eyes, and he nodded. I thought...maybe he respected that answer. At the very least he accepted it.

"What about you?" I asked. "Why are you here?"

"I was ordered to be here," he said.

"You were not-ordered," I said.

"Right, but Jorgen is my flightleader and I followed him."

The way I remembered it, the rest of them dragged Jorgen along until he caught up to the idea.

"So you disagree, then. You don't think you should have come."

Arturo hesitated. Maybe he was worried about expressing disagreement with his superior, but he seemed to have a more familiar relationship with Jorgen. I thought there was more to it.

“Do you wish you were back on Detritus?” I asked. “Helping your people to broker a peace deal?”

He was quiet for a moment, staring out the window into the miasma. “No,” he admitted. “I think we’re doing the right thing, helping you.”

I nodded. “Yes. You are.”

“Maybe not the *smart* thing,” he said. “I worry we’ve chosen the losing side on both your planet and mine, and I’m afraid that this is going to go terribly wrong for all of us. But I don’t like the idea of bargaining with the people who’ve been murdering us for generations. I don’t like the idea of peace talks with the beings who’ve been keeping us in a cage.”

I smiled. He understood then. “Giving in to them feels like deciding to die slowly.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “But you’re right that it feels like admitting we’re lesser. Like we’re saying we deserved the way they treated us, and we’re willing to simply forgive and forget.”

“The Superiority likes that idea,” I said, “so long as we’re always the ones doing the forgetting.”

Arturo nodded, staring out at the miasma again. I liked the way he thought about things. The fact that he *did* think about them, while so many people on both his planet and mine were willing to swallow the easy story without worrying about whether it was a true one.

“Did you choose to be a pilot?” I asked. “Your people are at war, but you can’t all be fighters.”

“No,” Arturo said. “They say we’re all part of the war effort no matter our job, and maybe that’s true in a way. But being a pilot gets you a lot of respect. A lot of disadvantaged people want to pass the pilot’s test for the opportunities it affords them, but for me it was expected. My parents have a lot of connections, a lot of...social power, I guess. And to maintain the empire, I had to be a pilot.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “You have to prove you are the best.”



“They didn’t want me to stay and prove it,” Arturo said. “I nearly got killed when I was a cadet. My parents pulled strings, got me my pin early so I wouldn’t have to keep flying.”

“But you are flying.”

“Yeah,” Arturo said. “My parents weren’t happy about it. Neither was my girlfriend. They all felt like I’d done my part. But I hadn’t, you know? I hated the thought of slinking back to the caverns and benefiting from the deaths of my friends, people I knew and liked. It felt like cowardice, hiding when I should be out there fighting.” He shook his head.

“Is that why your...” Jorgen didn’t like it when I used this word. “I don’t think there’s an exact translation for it in my language, but your mate—”

“My girlfriend,” Arturo said. “Yeah, that’s why she broke up with me ultimately. I think she wanted to for a while, but didn’t feel like she could. Like, it doesn’t feel good to give up on someone who’s fighting for the future of humanity, but she’d always thought I was going to come back a few months after flight school. And then I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. I think we’re both better off, honestly. She said I’d changed, that I didn’t care about the things I used to.” He shrugged. “She was probably right.”

Given how deeply he seemed to care about his people’s freedom now, I thought that could only be a good thing, but I wondered if he would agree.

“We’re on the same side,” I said. “As long as you want to fight the Superiority, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“Same to you,” he said. “Jorgen gets hung up on rules, but he doesn’t want to play nice with them any more than you and I do.”

I believed him. I couldn’t be absolutely sure he was telling the truth, but he had the same problem with me.

Regardless, once we got everything in order, we were all going to find out.

I worried it would be uncomfortable to sleep on the platform, but my brother and the Independence pilots had found the bunk rooms from when the platform was inhabited. There was an entire block of them—more rooms than we could possibly need. The Independence pilots took up residence in one, and Rinakin's family and some of the other refugees spread out over a few more. The rooms had obviously been used by salvagers in recent years, because the old cushioning had been replaced on all but the top bunks, where it was mostly disintegrated. The other bunks weren't as soft or as clean as I would have liked, but they were better than sleeping in the cockpits.

The human men all settled into one of the sleeping rooms and the women into another, where they invited me to join them. In one of the adjoining common rooms, Kimmalyn and Sadie divided the algae strips and custard so that everyone got a portion for dinner. I passed on the algae—since we knew the nut wafers were safe for me to eat, I choked a couple down.

I could have gone to eat with my brother, but instead I stayed with the humans. I needed to make sure they didn't have any second thoughts about what we were doing here, and besides that I was starting to enjoy their company.

"You can have a cup of custard to dip those nut bars in if you want," Kimmalyn said, pushing the jug of liquid in my direction.

I peered at the cloudy white substance. "What is it?"

"It's milk," Sadie told me. "But like, old milk. I think? I'm not totally clear how they make it."

"Human milk?" I asked.

"Ew, no," Sadie said. "Cow's milk, I think."

That sounded disgusting. "I'm all right," I said. "Though I think Happy will take my portion."

The slug was leaning out of Kimmalyn's sling, dangling down like it was going to dip its face right into the jug.

"Happy!" Kimmalyn said. "Yours is over here." She pulled the slug out of the sling and deposited it with the others, who were happily chewing algae strips.

Jorgen approached. FM and Rig hadn't joined us—last I'd seen she was sitting with Rig in the hangar while he worked on my ship, both of them speaking in low voices.

“Can I ask for your help with something?” Jorgen asked me.

“Yes,” I said, and we walked out into a hallway with a long window looking out into the miasma.

Jorgen pressed his fingers to the glass, watching the miasma swirl against it. “Since we have a minute, I was wondering if you could teach me something about cytonics.”

“Of course,” I said, and I took a seat on the floor of the hallway, my back opposite the window. The outline of Hollow was dimly visible, its dark branches reaching up toward the red sky.

“Gran-Gran taught me how to meditate,” Jorgen said, sitting down facing me. “To listen to the stars. It helped, but I didn't end up hearing the stars. I heard the taynix instead.”

“That sounds ultimately more useful,” I said.

“It probably was. But Spensa was able to hyperjump all the way to Starsight.”

“Technically all cytonics have every power,” I said. “I'm not clear on how many there are. We're only able to manifest some of them deliberately after a lot of training. And some we may never be able to use. Of the five cytonics on ReDawn, I'm the only one who has been able to hyperjump.”

“Which is why the other cytonics weren't able to follow us here immediately, even before we got the inhibitor up,” Jorgen said. “And if I'm never going to be able to learn—”

“That's what I'm trying to tell you,” I said. “There are other valuable types of cytonics. Mindblades are supposed to be the most difficult. I've never been able to manifest those.”

“You said those are like little bits of the nowhere that cut like razorblades?”

“Yes,” I said. “Like your Boomslug.”

“Boomslug!” Boomslug said from Jorgen's shoulder.

“I haven't been able to do that either,” Jorgen said.

“Let’s start with what’s already working,” I said. “You know how to find my mind and the minds of the taynix. Can you do it now?”

Jorgen absently stroked Boomslug on its spines. He closed his eyes, and I could feel his mind reaching out toward mine.

“Good. Now reach out farther. Stretch yourself over the space of the planet. See if you can find the Unity cytonics. Now that you have the key to the inhibitor, you should be able to find them.”

“It’s easier when I’m closer to the source,” Jorgen said. “When I heard the taynix below the surface of Detritus, there were so many of them, so it was louder—”

“Try, Jorgen,” I said. “Stop focusing so much on what you aren’t able to do, and *try*.”

I felt his presence in my mind as he reached out. *I hate this*, Jorgen said. *I can’t do enough*.

“There you go,” I said. “You can reach me. Now try to find others. And be quieter while you do it. They don’t know yet who you are, and we don’t want to give them that information unless it benefits us to do so.”

“You heard that?” Jorgen said. He sounded embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to send what I was thinking—”

“You have to be careful not to broadcast when you’re making contact,” I said. “But now try the meditation you learned before. Instead of reaching for my mind, reach out into the negative realm that surrounds us, out across the planet.”

Jorgen was quiet for a long time, while Boomslug tucked itself in the crook of his elbow and snored softly. After a while I thought Jorgen might have fallen asleep sitting up.

“I can feel the other taynix,” Jorgen said finally. “I can’t find any other cytonics—and there’s a space somewhere in the distance, a space that feels...solid. Like I can’t reach into it.”

I followed him across the miasma. Yes, there it was. On the far side of the core, on the side of the planet in a night cycle.

“The Council tree,” I said. “Inhibited by the other cytonics.” I wondered if they’d done that as a precaution once our inhibitor went up. They

wouldn't be able to maintain it all the time, but they must be worried about what we had planned.

They wanted us to believe they were in control, but they were still afraid of us, which meant they weren't. Not entirely.

"I need to learn how to make those inhibitors," Jorgen said.

"You learned how to find a place that's been inhibited," I said. "You might be happy for that first."

"It's not enough," Jorgen said.

I understood what he meant. It would never be enough until the fight was over and his people were safe. "Focus on what you have," I said. "We can work on it more, but I think you should sleep first. Tiring yourself out will only make you more frustrated. And when you're frustrated, it's much more difficult to learn." And dangerous, if you started manifesting things like concussion bolts and mindblades.

Jorgen didn't argue. "That makes sense. Thanks, Alanik."

Now *I* felt inadequate. Jorgen and his team had risked everything to help me, and I'd hardly shown him anything.

*It's not enough*, he'd said. I felt the same.

"Get some rest," I said.

"Good night," Jorgen said, and he left me staring up into the red-violet glow of the sun against the miasma above.

## Seventeen

I had a hard time following my own advice, and so I spent a good portion of the sleep cycle lying awake, listening. Sometime while the humans were all asleep, I caught a communication traveling through the negative realm.

*—everything in hand—* Quilan was saying. *—give us time—retrieve Alanik—*

*—give us the rogue cytonic and her allies—if that proves difficult for you—set up a government who can.*

I drew a deep breath. Quilan was still trying to pacify the Superiority, but he had a storm in a bottle, and any moment the glass might break. He was holding them off for now, but if they grew tired of waiting we were going to pay the price.

We had to make our move tomorrow, with whatever resources we had to work with.

I woke in the morning unsure of how much sleep I'd actually gotten, though I was still glad we'd taken the time to rest. Tired pilots were sloppy pilots, and sloppy pilots lost matches. Or in this case got themselves killed.

While the humans were eating, I used the radio in Jorgen's ship to check the frequency Nanalis had used to broadcast the message from Rinakin. It was a Unity channel, one they often used to send messages to their people, despite Superiority admonitions that we keep wireless communication to a minimum. I wondered how long that would last once they gave the Superiority more influence over ReDawn. I wondered if they would regret it.

There was no broadcast now, but there was a repeating message about an upcoming special conversation between Rinakin and one of the most popular Unity orators later in the morning.

That was good. If Rinakin was broadcasting, I could use that signal to find his location. They would unintentionally lead me right to him.

When everyone finished eating, I followed the humans to the control room with the taynix boxes. Rig, Jorgen, FM, and I gathered in the room while the others waited outside.

“None of your people died in the night,” I said to Jorgen. “So I suppose the udal nuts weren’t toxic to you.”

“You only say that because you didn’t have to share a room with Nedd last night,” Jorgen said.

“All right,” Rig said. “I’ve finished reassembling Alanik’s ship, and I found the shield systems. They’re similar to the ones on Platform Prime, so I was able to get them working. I don’t think it’s *as* effective as the planetary shield, because we don’t have hundreds of other platforms to form a barrier. But look.”

He gestured out the window at a blueish tint now coloring the miasma.

“That’s something,” Jorgen said. “Good work.”

I wondered how much sleep Rig had gotten, but he didn’t complain. “We expect we know how the comms and navigation systems work,” he said. “They should be similar to the hypercomms and hyperdrives we already use. But we want to check out this unknown cytonic weapons system, and then make a plan for how to use the platform to fight back.”

“Rig and I were thinking that Boomslug might be the right type to put in a weapons system,” FM said. “Given what we’ve seen him do.”

Jorgen knelt to gently pick up Boomslug, who was lying in the doorway to the control room. “You ready, buddy?”

“Buddy,” Boomslug said in his deep voice.

“Okay,” Rig said. “It would be really nice to have a weapons system we can control.”

FM took Boomslug from Jorgen and put him into the box. “I am going to give you so much caviar if this works,” she said.

“If we have to experiment on him,” Jorgen said, “I’m glad he’s inside a metal box where he hopefully can’t hurt us.”

I was pretty sure mindblades could pass through most substances and do damage as they went, but I didn’t tell Jorgen that. If the former inhabitants

of this platform had put a taynix in this box and then used it to power weapons, presumably they hadn't cut themselves to ribbons in the process.

"All right," Rig said when the box was locked. "Let's see what he can do."

"What am I going to ask it?" Jorgen said. "Please attack...nothing?"

"Go boom," FM said. "You remember what that felt like, right?"

Jorgen winced. "Too well."

"Can you aim the gun?" I asked. "We're a long way from Hollow, but we don't know exactly how far this weapon can reach."

"She's right," Rig said. "The Superiority had planetary weapons. This could be one of those. I didn't see anything on this platform as big as that was, but I didn't exactly perform an exhaustive search, and—"

"I'll try to focus away from the tree," Jorgen said. "Out in the miasma. The same way I do when I direct them to hyperjump. Anyone else have any concerns?"

We were all quiet.

"Okay," Jorgen said. "Here goes."

I focused on the mind of the slug, trying not to make enough contact that I would distract it from Jorgen's message, but just enough that I could feel the change.

I didn't need to though. The whole platform quivered with the reverberation, like a weapon had fired with incredible force. Out the window, the miasma in front of us shifted, swirling in eddies around invisible projectiles.

"Scud!" Nedd shouted from outside. "What was *that*?"

"Mindblades," I said. "Did they aim where you wanted them to go?"

"They did," Jorgen said. "We still have no idea how powerful that weapon is. It moved the gas clouds around, but that doesn't mean—"

"A well-placed mindblade can cut right through a ship's hull," I said.

"That seems like something we can use to defend ourselves," Rig said. "Though I worry we'll have already drawn attention by using it."

A plan began to form in my mind. "Drawing attention might be a good thing though," I said. "If we were to move the platform and activate the



weapons, Unity would want to stop us.”

“That’s true,” Jorgen said. “They’d send forces after us.”

“But they wouldn’t be able to get past the autoturrets quickly,” I said. “That kind of operation requires a lot of drones and a lot of patience, and that’s *if* they could get through the shield. They’d want to send Unity’s cytonics to stop you.”

“What good are cytonics if we have an inhibitor up?” FM asked.

“They’d still be able to affect us,” I said. “The inhibitor prevents cytonics without the key from using their powers from *within* the field. The other cytonics could still surround us and put up an inhibitor field of their own, preventing us from using the cytonic weapons or hyperjumping out, essentially trapping us.”

“We’d still have the autoturrets and the shield to defend us,” Jorgen said.

“Yes,” I said. “But they can also magnify each other’s abilities. Quilan can use his cytonic powers to knock people out with a concussion bolt. It’s what he did to me before I crashed your ship. The other cytonics can help him amplify it, creating a concussion field, similar to the way they join their minds together in an inhibitor. They’ve done it before during political protests.” They said they were quelling riots, trying to keep things peaceful. But knocking people out en masse always seemed violent to me.

“Why haven’t they done that to us already?” FM asked.

“I imagine they’re planning to,” I said. “But it wouldn’t let them get inside the shield, and it’s not easy to do. They’d have to surround the platform and maintain more or less the same positions while they do it. It’s not very applicable in an actual battle, where the enemy ships can chase you out of formation.”

“So we’d need ships in the air,” Jorgen said, “making sure they can’t get into formation to inhibit us or use the concussion field. We could tempt the other cytonics away from Rinakin, which would make it easier for you to rescue him.”

“Right,” I said. Even if they had Rinakin inside a taynix-powered inhibitor, I’d still have a better chance of rescuing him without the other cytonics to contend with.

“What exactly are we going to do to get their attention though?” FM asked. “It’ll take more than just firing the hyperweapon into the miasma.”

“Is there some Unity base we could fire on?” Jorgen said. “We don’t want to hit civilian targets, but if we could hit a military one—”

The idea of actually firing a mindblade weapon, even at a Unity target, was horrifying to me. “I don’t want to kill anyone unless we have to,” I said.

“Sure,” Jorgen said. “We could wait for them to fire first.”

“But there will be a lot of Unity people on their base who *aren’t* firing at us,” I said. “And I don’t want to shoot at them.”

The humans stared at me for a moment, like they could accept this but didn’t quite understand it.

They’d been at war their whole lives and were willing to make sacrifices I wasn’t ready for. I acted like I was hardened to the consequences, but I’d never killed anyone. I’d mostly shot people with tagging lasers—most of my time in starships had been spent playing games.

“What if we moved the platform into the miasma outside the Unity headquarters on Tower?” I asked. “It’s a tree with a huge population, so I don’t want to fire on it. But just *being* there would feel like a threat to Unity, more than any other tree but the Council tree. We can’t threaten that one, because we need to draw the cytonics farther away so I can go and get Rinakin if they leave him behind. But you don’t have to shoot at the tree. Just hyperjump there, maybe fire a warning shot with the hyperweapon into the miasma.”

“That’s a better idea,” Jorgen said. “You’re right. We don’t want to hurt anyone we don’t have to.”

“Good,” I said. “Meanwhile I could go in and get Rinakin, since he’d be relatively unguarded.”

“Unless they bring him with them,” FM said.

“They might,” I said. “But if they bring him to us, we can pivot the plan and I can come back to rescue him from their ships.”

“You shouldn’t go alone,” Jorgen said. “There are too many things that could go wrong with that plan, and you’d need backup.”

“I’ll be stealthier alone,” I said.

“But we work as a team,” Jorgen insisted, sparing a glance at FM. “You need someone there if things go wrong. At the very least that person could engage their taynix to come back here and tell us what’s happened to you, so we can organize a rescue effort.”

It was a good sign that they would consider rescuing me if something went wrong.

“I’ll have to stay here to communicate with the slugs in the platform,” Jorgen continued, “and Rig will need to stay too, but—”

“I’ll go,” Arturo said from the doorway.

I looked at him. Yesterday it had seemed like he was starting to trust me, but here he was volunteering to come along and babysit me. To make sure that I wasn’t going to have his people make a spectacle out of themselves and then grab Rinakin and run.

I could do that, I realized. Arturo’s presence wouldn’t stop me. But the whole point of going to Detritus in the first place was to find allies. Even if the rest of their people were making a different choice, these humans were still willing to work with me. So far, anyway.

Jorgen nodded. “That makes the most sense. Maybe you should take Nedd as well.”

“Alanik is right,” Arturo said. “The more people we bring, the less stealthy we are. But if we’re going into combat with a ship with a cytonic inhibitor, we’ll want at least two of us. If we find that it’s being guarded by a whole fleet, we can hyperjump back and regroup, but at least we’ll know more than we know now.”

“All right,” Jorgen said. “We’re going to need to get everyone together and talk this through. Alanik, would you go talk to the Independence pilots? See if they’ll join us? We could meet in the hangar. It’s the only space we’ve found so far that’s big enough to fit all of us together comfortably.”

I nodded.

I didn’t like putting any of them in danger, but if we succeeded it would be worth it.

## Eighteen

An hour later, Rig, Jorgen, and I gathered in the control room again to use the hyperdrive. The other pilots—both human and UrDail—were all ready in their ships to be transported out to defend the platform. Rig had pulled the radio out of the wreckage of my ship and installed it in the control room, so he'd be able to talk to us once we were in the air.

"Here we go," Jorgen said as Rig deposited Drape in the navigation system taynix box. "At least we've used hyperdrives before. Do we think this works the same way as the ones in our ships? I just send it a location and the whole platform will move?"

"The Superiority moves massive ships with hyperdrives," I said. "So this platform shouldn't be a problem."

"I only know how to send the slugs to places we both know," Jorgen said. "I don't know where we're going."

"I can give it coordinates," I said. "If we're going to Tower, I want to be sure we're out of range of the tree so the autoturrets don't fire on it." I wasn't going to be responsible for that many civilian casualties, and not just because it would be impossible to convince my people we meant well after something like that.

"Could you move the platform yourself?" Rig asked me. "It seems like you could do it without the help of the taynix."

"Maybe," I said. "But I'd rather not risk it."

"Plus, we should test it with the hyperdrive," Jorgen said. "That way we know if it works, in case I need to pull us out after Alanik is gone." He turned to me. "Do you know what kind of range the guns have?"

"I'm going to overestimate it," I said, "just to be safe. We want the guns shooting at the people who come after us, not at Tower. We can always move the platform a second time if we need to."

I searched out across the planet, reaching past Industry and Spindle—where I lived—to Tower. It was far from other trees at the moment, leaving many branches of space out in the miasma to move the platform to. I needed it close enough to Tower that Unity saw it as a threat, but not so close that anyone got hurt, even aircraft that were passing through the busy airspace around the tree.

Better to be too far out than too close. I chose a place farther away and impressed the coordinates into my mind. And then, reaching out for Drape, I fed them to him.

Nothing happened.

“Why isn’t it working?” I asked.

“He’s not listening to you,” Jorgen said. “Probably because he doesn’t know you.”

That made sense. Most of the slugs back on Detritus hadn’t come when I called them either. And those that had only did so because I’d promised them food and friends.

“That’s a good thing,” Rig said. “It means not all the slugs can be used against us in combat.”

“You’re going to have to give him the command,” Jorgen said to Rig.

Rig bent down, speaking through the metal door of the box. “*Go.*”

There was the slightest hesitation.

And then that horrible loss of control again as I slipped into the negative realm without pulling myself through. I came back to where I was standing before, in the center of the control room.

The window facing the miasma suddenly went dark.

“Um, guys?” Kimmalyn called from the direction of the hangar. “You need to come see this.”

We all crowded out the door to the hangar. Pilots sat in their ships with their canopies open, looking out the enormous windows through the swirling miasma at the reaching branches of Tower, so named because it was the tallest of all the trees—long and lean, with branches that soared nearly straight upward into the sky. Here there were almost no horizontal buildings, only spirals built into the sides of the branches, all illuminated

with hundreds of thousands of city lights. The intricacies of the architecture were too tiny to see from this distance, but the overall effect was still impressive. I felt a little bit of pride at the way the humans gaped at it.

“That’s incredible,” Rig said.

“I thought that other tree was impressive,” Arturo added.

“Hollow is a ruin,” I said. “*This* is UrDail civilization.”

All around, I could see the Independence pilots sitting taller.

I was glad to see that I’d managed to place the platform far enough from the tree that the turrets weren’t shooting at it. But we were close enough to be visible from the branches, so people had to be taking notice.

Jorgen moved to his ship and fiddled with the radio. He picked up a channel talking about the weather patterns in the miasma, and then an air traffic control channel.

“—obstacle in the airspace on the duskward side. All flights avoid—”

“Yeah,” Nedd said. “They definitely noticed us.”

“What about the other cytonics?” FM asked.

Jorgen closed his eyes, and I waited while he reached out across the negative realm around ReDawn. “I can feel one of them,” he said. “Your friend Quilan?”

I followed his reach. He was right. Quilan was moving toward us. He’d moved so fast, he must have already been in a ship before we hyperjumped.

“We’ve got their attention,” Jorgen said. “All ships, time to get in the air. We’ll fly out of the hangar together. When we’re all ready, we’ll hyperjump everyone beyond the range of the autoturrets.”

Canopies lowered and ships lifted off the landing pad. Nedd hung back, pulling his taynix, Chubs, out of its box. We’d agreed that I should take a hyperdrive with me, in case Arturo and I were separated, and Naga would be able to find Chubs instantly. It would leave Nedd without a hyperdrive in the battle, so he’d have to rely on his flightmates to pull him in and out with light-lances, just like the Independence pilots.

“Okay, buddy,” Nedd said. “You’re going for an adventure with the nice alien lady.”

“Nedd,” Arturo said, like he thought he might offend me. But when Nedd handed over his taynix—a *hyperdrive*, a creature so valuable most people in the universe would kill for it—I couldn’t feel anything but awe.

They were really going to let me *take* one. And yes, I knew it was only because they thought it would help them follow me if I tried to escape them—and it probably would.

But still. I’d risked everything to find out the secret to these creatures. And now I was holding one in my hands.

It looked up at me, its face quizzical. “Alien lady!” it trilled.

“Get to your ship,” Jorgen said to Nedd. “Let’s *go*.”

The rest of the flight was already maneuvering their ships out the hangar doors and onto the surface of the platform. I set Chubs down in the space behind my seat, but moments later he was nuzzling my ankles down by the pedals. I didn’t relish the idea of his obstruction getting me shot down by the autofire, so I scooped him into my lap.

“How do they stand flying with you?” I asked him.

“Flying with you!” Chubs said. The taynix sounded like simple mimics, but they must understand at least some of what they said if they could learn each other’s names and then find one another through the negative realm.

Rig waited outside my ship while I checked the controls.

“We removed that thing that was intercepting signals as they came in,” Rig said. “We thought it might help Jorgen not be susceptible to cytonic interference.”

“No, my ship doesn’t block cytonic interference,” I said. “I think what you removed was an encryption device, but I won’t need that today anyway.”

“Oh,” Rig said. He looked embarrassed, but he didn’t need to be. He’d done a good job getting my ship back in flying condition, from what I could tell.

“Thank you for fixing this for me,” I said.

“Of course,” Rig said. “I’m confident about the damage repairs. Those were all completed ages ago. All I did last night was finish the reassembly. You should be fine in the air.”

He backed off, and I engaged my acclivity ring, lifting off the landing bay floor and flying out to meet the others in formation around Jorgen.

I let one of the humans hit me with their light-lance and hyperjump me beyond the autofire with the Independence pilots. I didn't know how much hyperjumping I was going to have to do, and I wanted to keep the number of jumps to a minimum when I could. Jorgen jumped us way out, giving the autofire a wider berth than we probably needed.

I checked the frequency Rinakin had been broadcasting from. His program had begun, and I could hear him opining about how the rift between our factions was the *real* problem for ReDawn. According to my ship's frequency locator, the signal was coming from the Council tree, exactly as expected.

That was good. I reached out with my cytonic senses, searching for Quilan, and found him closing on our location. I scrambled with my radio, trying to find the flight's general channel to let Jorgen know, but by the time I found it he was already giving the flights the bearing of the incoming enemy. "We're going to slow to point-five Mag," he said, "and fly toward Tower, away from the enemy."

The ships immediately followed his order. By putting our people on the opposite side of the platform from Quilan, Jorgen ensured that Quilan would have to pass around the platform to get to them. Jorgen would be able to fire the hyperweapon at him without worrying about clipping his own people in the blast.

The Independence flight joined us as we flew away from the platform toward the tree, slow enough that Quilan would easily catch us. He had to know we were up to something, but he wouldn't know what.

"Rig?" Jorgen said. "Do you have a visual on the enemy flight?"

"I do," Rig said. "They're closing on the platform."

Flying in the opposite direction, I couldn't see the incoming ships—which Quilan must have called in from the reinforcements at the Council tree—except on my sensor screen. But I *felt* the disturbance rippling through the negative realm as Jorgen contacted Boomslug in the platform control room and directed him to fire on the flight as they skirted the other



side of the platform. I scanned radio channels, catching bits of their transmissions as pilots screamed and swore and called their intentions to eject.

I didn't know if they all made it, but as Jorgen directed us to pivot around and fly below the platform again, I did see several pilots descending through the miasma with parachutes. Two of the ships collided with the far side of the platform.

A few more ships cut toward us, having avoided the mindblades. Unfortunately, Quilan was among them. *Alanik*, he said in my mind. *What are you doing?*

If this distraction was going to work, Quilan had to believe I meant business. *I'm doing what has to be done. Look what that did to your flight. What do you think it will do to your people on Tower?*

*You've lost your mind*, Quilan sent back.

That was good. I needed him to believe that I had.

"FM, Sentry, take point. Engage the enemy ships. T-Stall, Catnip, Nedder, back them up."

Five ships shot out in front of us, meeting with the enemy ships as they skirted around the platform outside the autofire zone. A number of Independence ships joined them.

I reached into the negative realm, checking on the Council tree. Nearly a quarter of the way around the planet, I could feel the dead space fading away, the area around the Council tree no longer covered by cytonic inhibitors.

Quilan had called in the other cytonics, realizing that the only way to stop the platform was to inhibit our ability to use cytonics in the area or lay down a concussion field.

"Jerkface," I said over the radio. "We are a go."

"Copy," Jorgen replied. "Do it."

"Don't forget about me," Arturo said. He flew close on my wing, like he wanted to be sure I remembered he was tagging along.

As if I could forget.

When I reached out for Naga's mind, I realized that Chubs had snuggled around my waist and fallen asleep.

In a starfighter. In the middle of a battle.

I was glad *someone* had been able to find some peace. It wasn't going to be Naga, as I reached out for its mind, giving it cytonic coordinates near the Council tree, but far enough away we wouldn't be immediately spotted.

"Tell Naga to go," I said to Arturo over the radio.

"Naga, go," he said.

Arturo's ship blinked out of existence, and I followed.

# Nineteen

We passed through the negative realm and back into our reality, staring out into the purple darkness of the night sky. There were no stars peeking through the miasma, not this deep. Merely a cloudy darkness with patches of violet and red, like someone had put a multicolored blanket over the sun.

It was nearly dawn on this part of the planet. The Council tree stood out in the distance, the walkway lights of the city pathways blinking through the reddish cloud between us.

“Stars, I’m never going to get used to how strange this is,” Arturo said over the radio.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I said.

“So scudding beautiful,” he agreed. “They make our trees look like infants. Those used to seem impressive to me. Most of our plants grow in vats.”

I reached out toward the Council tree. Quilan would know I’d disappeared, of course. He’d guess what I was doing. But the other cytonics were moving away from us now in the direction of Tower. They’d boarded ships in a hurry. Quilan was worried.

He was right to be. I’d left a group of humans with a superweapon outside one of ReDawn’s major population centers.

“The other cytonics are leaving,” I said. “Do you think Jerkface will keep his promise not to fire on the tree?” I was proud I remembered to use the callsign over the radio, though I still didn’t quite understand the purpose.

“He will,” Arturo said without hesitation. “Do you worry he won’t?”

Yes, I did. But admitting it felt like weakness.

“Your callsign,” I said. “It’s...Amphi?”

“Amphisbaena,” he said.

My pin didn’t translate it. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a dragon from Old Earth mythology. I picked it because it’s fearsome and it flies.”

“If I need a callsign I’d like something that flies,” I said. “That seems logical.”

“It doesn’t have to be something logical,” he said. “It can be anything you want.”

That seemed more difficult though. To pick from *anything*. “We don’t have creatures that fly on ReDawn. They wouldn’t survive the miasma.”

“Yeah, well, we never had real dragons either. There are other things that fly though, real or not. Like eagles. Or angels.”

“I’ve heard of those!” I said. “Flying humans from your old religions. When my people first met yours through the negative realm, some of them thought we were angels. Others thought we might be devils. Like angels but evil, right?”

“That’s true. But you’re more of an angel though, right? I don’t like thinking we’ve made a deal with the devil.”

He said it jokingly, but it was the kind of joke that had the bite of truth to it. “An angel then,” I said. “Definitely.”

“It suits you,” he said. “An angel with a great big sword, coming down to exact justice.”

I wasn’t sure that was what I was, but the idea of wielding a sword of justice against the Superiority was appealing, so long as it was a metaphorical one. I had no desire to get into an actual fight with such a crude weapon.

“One moment,” I said. “I’m going to check on Rinakin.”

I tuned my radio to the channel he was broadcasting from. He was still there, talking with one of the Unity orators about the trade benefits of capitulating to the Superiority. I ran the signal through my ship’s location device, then switched to my channel with Arturo.

“Rinakin is still broadcasting from the Council tree,” I said. “The signal is coming from the area of his old residence. His primary residence is far from here, but he has a place where he stayed when he was on the Council, before he lost the election.”

“What are we flying into?” Arturo asked. “Do they have gun emplacements? Other defenses?”

“No,” I said. “Putting weapons around the government headquarters would be far too aggressive. They’re trying to convince the Superiority that we’re peaceful. And Quilan and the others will have taken most of the in-residence air force with them as well.”

“Finally the Superiority has done us a favor,” Arturo said. “I’ll take it. Are we flying in or hyperjumping?”

“We shouldn’t get any closer in our ships,” I said. “Let’s stop our ships and leave them. We can leave Chubs behind as well. That way we’ll both be able to get back here if something goes wrong.”

“Last time I hyperjumped out of my ship, I left it on the other side of the universe,” Arturo said. “But you’re the flightleader on this mission. And I’d rather your friends down there didn’t see us coming.”

“Agreed,” I said, reaching out to Naga. I wound my way through the negative realm to the Council building, forming the coordinates in my mind. I’d traveled via hyperjump to Rinakin’s residence before, so I knew exactly where I was going.

And then I called Naga to follow as I jumped. The eyes fixed on me and I could feel their ire, like they wanted to swat me out of the sky. That was two hyperjumps in quick succession. I hoped I wouldn’t have to make many more.

We emerged in Rinakin’s study, next to the wide barkwood table. The room looked pristine, nothing like the mess it had been when Rinakin was working in here regularly. The shelves were empty, the table polished and clear.

Through the arched doorway I could hear a voice.

I grabbed Arturo by the arm and pulled him behind the door. Naga squirmed in her sling, trying to twist around to look up at me.

“Thank you, Cessil,” Rinakin was saying. “You don’t need to return for the tray. I’ll hold it until morning.”

“Of course,” another voice responded. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call.”

Rinakin was no longer broadcasting. I scowled. He was being treated like a guest, not a prisoner. Maybe Nanalis wanted to keep that a secret from the staff as well, and Rinakin had decided to go along with it. But that seemed so...spineless. Rinakin wasn't the type to back down, even if they were threatening his family.

I heard the clicking of a spoon in a metal-lined cup. Rinakin was apparently taking *tea*.

Behind me Arturo was silent, but I could feel his breath against my neck. Every part of me was suddenly aware of him, standing so near. Goosebumps broke out over my skin.

"How do you want to play this?" Arturo whispered. The pin read his volume, translating his words so softly I could barely hear them.

The spoon clicked against a table, followed by silence.

"Wait here," I whispered back.

Arturo nodded. I was glad he didn't feel the need to keep me in sight every second. I didn't need him tending me like a child.

But I hesitated. He could jump away in a moment and leave me behind. I could follow, of course. I could jump right back to their planet and give them a piece of my mind, so it wasn't being left behind that frightened me.

It was losing their trust, I realized. It was being alone.

It was discovering that I always had been.

"You ready?" Arturo asked. He was watching me quizzically, like he didn't understand why I was hesitating.

"You'll be right here," I said.

He looked surprised. "Yes," he whispered, his voice barely a breath. "I'll be right here if you need me."

I was a cytonic. With the inhibitor gone, I was in power here. I didn't need some human watching my back.

But somehow it made me feel better anyway.

"Okay," I said, and I stepped around the door and into the hallway beyond. The corridor opened up into Rinakin's living space. It wasn't the most lavish place—Rinakin preferred function over ostentation. He sat on a cushioned chair formed with branches that twined together high above his

head. He had a wooden cup pressed to his lips, and he looked up at me in surprise as I approached.

I glanced around. If Rinakin was secretly a prisoner, they might be recording and monitoring him rather than posting obvious guards. I put a finger to my ear. *Are they listening?* I mouthed.

Rinakin shook his head and set down his cup. “We’re safe here,” he said. “Alanik, I’m so glad you’ve come back.”

“I can take you out of here,” I said. “I got rid of the other cytonics.”

“It isn’t safe,” Rinakin said. “Alanik, I’ve learned so much since I’ve been here. There isn’t time to explain, but you’re in terrible danger.”

Obviously. We were *both* in danger. “You need to come with me,” I said. “I’ll explain everything, but let me take you out of here before the Superiority realizes I’m here.”

“That’s just it,” Rinakin said. “*You* have to come with *me*. I have a ship we can use. I’ll tell you everything on the way.”

I blinked at him. Had he used the exact line on me that I’d used on him? And why didn’t he seem at all concerned about whether or not I’d rescued his family? “I really think we should have this conversation somewhere else.”

“Of course. As I said, I have a ship—”

Hairs rose on the back of my neck. Something was wrong here. “Rinakin,” I said. “Where did I go when I left?”

“What?” Rinakin said.

“Where did I go?” I asked. “When I left here. Where did you tell me to go?”

“You went to get fighters, and you brought them to rescue our allies at Hollow,” he said. “I heard all about it. You’ve done very well.”

“Okay,” I said. “Where’d I get the allies, Rinakin?”

“Alanik,” Rinakin said. “Time is of the essence—”

“I know,” I said. “So *tell me where you told me to go when we last spoke.*”

Rinakin sighed, and then he moved one of his hands to a device on his wrist. I took a step back, afraid it might be a weapon.

But he simply depressed a button.

My cytonic senses abruptly stopped, like I'd gone instantly blind. I was lost, alone, isolated, unable to reach out for the company of the endlessness of *everything*. Rinakin had a taynix box here somewhere. He'd activated a cytonic inhibitor.

"You're not Rinakin," I said, mostly for the benefit of Arturo.

The person who was not Rinakin smiled.



## Twenty

“You’re not Rinakin, but you look just like him,” I said. “How are you doing that?”

He smiled at me again and leaned back in his chair, like he wasn’t worried at all about what I was going to do next. That meant he probably had backup on the way, perhaps alerted by the inhibitor, or by another button on his wristband. From there they’d be able to drag me off to their ship, and then to the Superiority.

I hoped Arturo would stay silent. If they didn’t find him, at least he and Naga would be able to return to the platform if I didn’t find a way out of this. I didn’t expect them to mount a rescue, but at least—

A crash sounded from the office behind me, and I closed my eyes.

Not-Rinakin stood. “Did you bring someone with you?” he asked. He edged around me, keeping his back to the wall as he moved down the hallway so as not to turn it on me or the source of the noise.

I should try to make a run for it—

But I couldn’t leave Arturo to be taken. I followed not-Rinakin down the hall. Maybe we could surround him. Maybe we could—

Not-Rinakin turned into the doorway to the office, where little bits of a piece of one of Rinakin’s decorative vases lay in fragments on the floor. Not-Rinakin had barely taken a step into the room when he took a punch to his knee and an elbow to his gut, and went flying onto his backside on the hallway floor.

I moved toward him to kick him while he was down, but not-Rinakin lifted his hands in surrender. “Human! So aggressive! Stop, please!”

Arturo stood in the doorway, shaking his hand. “*Ouch*,” he said. “That scudding *hurt*. How did Spensa make it look so easy?”

“Easy!” Naga added.

Not-Rinakin tried to scramble to his feet, but Arturo raised his fist, and he sank to the ground again, protecting his face. I grabbed his wrist and pulled off his bracelet.

With a click of a button the inhibitor was gone, and the universe came to life around me again, like it had suddenly burst into song. With a second click the image over not-Rinakin's body dissolved, revealing a dione with bright crimson skin.

"Oh, scud," Arturo said.

This time I kicked the dione. Hard. They moaned and clutched their side.

"Where is Rinakin?" I asked. We didn't have much time, but with the inhibitor down we could get out much faster.

"You won't find him here," the dione said. "They took him away not long ago."

Oh *no*. I put a hand on Arturo's shoulder and sent Naga the coordinates of the cockpit of my ship in the miasma. She was either getting used to me or was very aware of the danger we were in, because she went without Arturo's permission this time.

"Ouch," Arturo said. He was squished in the cargo space behind my seat in the cockpit, his head pressed against the roof. "This is not ideal."

"Better than being taken by the Superiority," I said.

"Taken!" Naga said from the side of my seat.

Chubs sat on my dash, looking at us curiously.

"Think you can return me to my ship?" Arturo asked.

I gave Naga a clear picture of Arturo's cockpit. His ship had drifted away a bit, but I could still see it through my canopy, floating off to the side. Arturo and Naga disappeared, and a moment later the ship started flying toward mine. Chubs settled on my lap.

"Are you okay?" Arturo asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "How's your hand?"

"It's all right, though I think my ego is bruised. Nedd always said we ought to have more training in hand-to-hand combat. I guess he was right."

"It did the job," I said. "Superiority operatives apparently *really* don't like it when you punch them. I still have no idea how he managed to look

like Rinakin.” I still had the bracelet in my hand, and I set it on the floor next to my seat to be examined later.

“About that,” Arturo said. “Spensa had a ship she found on Detritus. It had holographic technology that let her pretend to be you.”

I remembered FM and Jorgen saying something about that. “And the Superiority stole it?”

“I think they must have gotten their hands on her ship. They already knew she’d been using a hologram to look like you, so they would have been searching for it intentionally.”

That was a terrifying thought. Though it was also startling to learn that Spensa had technology even the Superiority didn’t know about. They always seemed like they knew everything.

“Poor M-Bot,” Arturo said. “I’m kind of surprised he didn’t self-destruct or something. Spensa is going to be *pissed*.”

“She’s not the only one,” I said.

“I’m checking on the others over the radio,” Arturo said. “Scud, their situation sounds hot.”

It would be. We’d sent all the cytonics Unity had to offer right at them. I hadn’t heard from Jorgen. He said it was easier for him to contact me when I was near, but I hoped he could manage it even across the distance. I reached out to him now—the Unity cytonics had reached them, but they hadn’t managed to get the field up.

*Status report?* I asked him.

*We’re holding out,* Jorgen said. *We’ve kept the cytonics out of position so far, so they haven’t been able to get up their inhibitors or that concussion thing. They’re too busy not getting shot down. Did you find Rinakin?*

*Working on it.*

Jorgen fell silent, probably fully occupied dealing with Quilan and his people.

“We have to hurry and find Rinakin,” I said. “If they just left to take him to the Superiority, he could still be in transport. Let me see if I can find their ship.”

I closed my eyes, reaching across the miasma around the tree. It was easier to find a huge field of cytonic inhibition rather than one ship across the whole of the planet.

“Angel?” Arturo said. “We have incoming.”

I opened my eyes and scanned my proximity sensors. He was right. A contingent of ships was headed right for us. Either they’d scanned and found us, or Quilan had reported our whereabouts.

I needed to focus on finding the ship holding Rinakin. “You want to take point on this one?”

“Gladly,” Arturo said. “Evasive maneuvers.”

“Copy,” I said, mirroring Arturo’s movements as he cut a path away from the incoming ships. I tried to focus on the negative realm, reaching out with my senses, canvassing the area for dead spots.

*There.* Above the reaching branches of the tree, kilometers up in the miasma, was a tiny spot I couldn’t feel, like a dead nerve on an otherwise healthy patch of skin.

“Found it,” I said to Arturo. “Closer to the tree and *up*.”

“You want to take the lead now?” Arturo asked.

“Yes.” I accelerated and shot out in front of him, veering sharply upward so fast that my gravitational capacitors engaged, taking the brunt of the g-forces. The incoming ships changed course a moment later, following and gaining on us.

“I don’t know what kind of maneuvers you’re used to,” Arturo said. “And I’m sure we call them different things. So I’ll follow you and we’ll try not to get shot, okay?”

“Yes, that,” I said, and the ships behind us came into range and started to fire. Off my left wing, Arturo rolled his ship and pulled a tight series of dodging maneuvers I’d never seen before. But I had tricks of my own. Three ships came at me, destructors all firing at once, and I cut to the side, weaving between the projectiles, and then rolled upward again, still aiming for that dead patch in the sky.

“*Nice*,” Arturo said. “You’re going to have to teach me that one.”

“Same to you,” I said. The varsity leagues would die to get their hands on moves none of the other teams had seen before. Maybe *that* was how I was going to sell this alliance to the rest of my people. If they couldn’t see the sense in saving themselves from the Superiority, they could always be counted on to want their team to win.

“On your right!” Arturo said. I dodged before I saw the destructor fire, and it narrowly missed pinging my shield.

“We’re coming up on that dead spot,” I said.

There it was. The ship Quilan had used to take Rinakin. An UrDail ship with a cytonic inhibitor inside.

“They’ll have taynix in there,” I said to Chubs. “Should we collect you some new friends?”

“Friends!” Chubs said, hugging my stomach like he was enjoying the warmth.

If the taynix couldn’t hyperjump out of those boxes, he wouldn’t be able to go in and get them anyway. We were going to have to disable the ship and then grab it with my light hook to pull it in.

The ships behind us must have alerted it though, because it was flying away at high speed. “Accelerating,” I said to Arturo.

“Right behind you,” Arturo said, and we shot off after the escaping ship, the others close on our tails. I admired the way Arturo somehow managed to pull the most elaborate maneuvers, all while staying near enough to back me up when it got too hot.

I was every bit as good at evasive flying as he was, maybe better. But Arturo was something I’d never been—a real team player.

I closed in on the ship with the cytonic inhibitor, matching its speed. “I need to be sure he’s in there,” I said. “I’m going in close.”

“I’ll cover you,” Arturo said, and he did, blasting one of the ships on my tail with his destructors.

I cut a path toward the ship, pulling even with its left wing. The miasma turned my canopy into a blur of violet, but I held my ship steady. At this close range and at such high speed, it would be easy to collide and knock us both out of the sky.

The ship was much larger than mine, with a wider canopy. There in the pilot's seat was another dione, recognizable by the bright blue skin under their flight helmet. I pulled farther forward as destructor fire rained over us—the ships behind us were apparently more interested in taking me down than they were worried about hitting their allies. The larger ship cut to the side, trying to evade me—

But not before I caught a glimpse into the hold, where a second dione sat next to Rinakin, who was bound and gagged.

“He's there,” I said to Arturo. I followed as the ship turned a wheel roll to try to shake me. I stayed firm on its tail.

“Orders?” Arturo asked.

“Hang on,” I said, and I fired my light hook at the spinning ship, trying to grab it.

My hook connected, but the other ship's momentum pulled me to the side, right into a line of destructor fire. My shield took a hit, and I felt the impact in my bones.

“Angel,” Arturo said, “I've got three on my tail. I'm going to have to pull away to shake them.”

“Do it,” I said.

“You've got more on you,” he said. “Watch out—”

The destructor fire continued, and I was forced to drop my light hook and take a dive beneath the diones' ship to avoid losing my shield. “I lost them,” I said to Arturo.

“Stay alive,” Arturo said.

I had to ground that ship, but I couldn't do that way out here away from the trees. And certainly not with so many ships on our tail.

“I'm going to take them on,” I said. “Don't let them get away with Rinakin.” I pulled one of my favorite maneuvers from the junior leagues, a tight turn where my ship pivoted and my gravitational capacitors groaned and the weight of the universe seemed to bear down on my body—

And then it lifted, and I opened fire right in the faces of the enemy ships. They dodged to the side, but I pegged the shield of one and then caught another in a long burst of fire. It rolled, trying to avoid me, but its boosters

went up in smoke and then the ship exploded, blooming like an opening flower.

The ship started to drop, beginning an uncontrolled descent, still flying forward with the force of its momentum.

The pilot didn't eject.

I'd killed them.

"On your right," Arturo said, and he opened fire, driving back two ships. "Rinakin's ship is just ahead."

Right. Focus. I gripped the control sphere much tighter than I'd been trained to do, trying to ignore the panic rising in my throat.

I killed someone.

They were alive before, and now they were dead.

I did that.

Me.

"There it is," Arturo said. As if he sensed my hesitation, he flew past me, chasing after the ship. "Plan?"

Bile rose in my throat. I had to get out of here. I had to get out of the sky before—

Destructor fire shot over my left wing, and I startled. I slammed forward with my boosters, picking up speed, joining Arturo.

That was enough. I had to end it now. I gained on the ship holding Rinakin and shot at it again with my light hook, which connected, wrapping around the fuselage.

With my light hook in place, I did the only thing I could think of to do.

I reached into the negative realm, called to Naga behind me, and pulled.

## Twenty-one

We ripped out of the negative realm and skidded across the metal surface of Wandering Leaf. Our momentum died abruptly in the negative realm, but our boosters propelled us forward anew as we emerged again. I cut their power, keeping my eyes on the ship that held Rinakin as it skidded toward the base of one of the autoturrets and crashed to a stop.

My ship skidded a bit, grinding the landing gear against the metal of the platform, but it didn't sustain too much damage. I scrambled out, tucking Chubs under my arm in case I needed to hyperjump. I didn't know what the diones would do with Rinakin, but I guessed if they were his guards they'd be less averse to violence than not-Rinakin had been.

Sure enough, the canopy opened and one of the diones pointed a pistol at me and fired.

I lunged away behind the wing of their ship. They weren't going to mess around, so neither would I. I grabbed coordinates for the spot right behind the dione's seat and sent them to Chubs.

We appeared directly behind the dione with the gun, and right in front of the other very surprised dione, who let out a shriek.

Arturo's ship had slid farther than mine, and he climbed out and raced toward us, but before he could arrive I put a hand on each dione and sent Chubs the coordinates I knew best.

We appeared moments later in the living area in my home on Spindle. Several Unity operatives looked up at me from where they were playing a card game. They could do nothing but watch as I shoved both diones forward and then slipped into the negative realm again, directing Chubs to bring us both back to the surface of Wandering Leaf.

I ducked into the hangar to find Arturo staring at me wide-eyed. His voice was muffled by his helmet, but still audible. "I was going to try to punch them again."



“Thank the wind it didn’t come to that,” I said, and climbed into the back of the ship, searching for Rinakin.

The oxygen generators were still working in here, so thankfully he hadn’t gotten a whiff of the miasma. Rinakin looked up at me in shock, though he must have assumed I was the one chasing down his ship. One side of his head was red and swelling, possibly from the impact on landing.

I grabbed the gag and pulled it off of his mouth.

“Tell me something so I know it’s really you,” I said.

“Our first lesson in cytonics,” Rinakin said. “I tried to teach you to meditate, and you told me you thought it was a waste of time.”

That was true. I still got impatient with it, but now at least I saw the purpose behind it. Rinakin looked over my shoulder at Arturo. “Did you do it? Did you truly make an alliance with the humans?”

“I’m working on it,” I said. “Come on. We need to go check on them.”

I helped him forward and untied his wrists. He was favoring one of his arms, though I didn’t know if that was from the impact or rough handling by his captors. Arturo stepped to his other side and helped me guide him through the hangar and down the tunnels toward the control room. As we passed beneath the skylights I scanned the sky for ships, but it was too dark for me to see any. As we neared the control room the platform shuddered and the miasma parted off to the side, the mindblade weapons slicing the miasma into ribbons.

Rinakin stared in the direction of the fire. “I think I’ve missed a few things.”

“You have,” I told him. “There was someone pretending to be you, making speeches about how you were joining the cause of progress.”

“That I did know,” Rinakin said. “My captors played the broadcasts for me. That was...unpleasant to listen to.”

“I don’t have time to explain everything,” I said as we reached the control room door. “I need to get out there and help the humans.”

“You’re back,” Rig said, turning from the main control panel to look at us with surprise.

“This is Rinakin,” Arturo said, helping him inside. Rinakin slid to the floor next to one of the defense system boxes, holding his arm.

“Jerkface,” Rig said into his headset. “Alanik’s mission was a success.”

“Good to hear,” Jorgen said over the radio.

“Way to go, Alanik!” I could hear Nedd say.

“Did anyone follow you?” Rig asked.

“No,” Arturo said. “Alanik took care of them.”

He meant the diones. I hadn’t killed them. I’d simply marooned them. Not like that ship I shot out of the sky. It would have reached the core by now, crashed there, entombing the body of the person who’d burned alive inside.

Arturo put a hand on my shoulder, pulling me outside. “Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice. “You’re shaking.”

My whole body was trembling, and though I tried to get a grip on myself I couldn’t make it stop. “I’m fine,” I said.

“The hell you are,” Arturo said. “What’s wrong?”

He didn’t know. I’d shot someone out of the sky and their ship *exploded* before they could eject and I *killed* them and he didn’t think anything of it. Probably more people had died in the battle here at the platform. I could hear Rig talking to Jorgen over the radio inside. We needed to get up there.

The world seemed unstable though, like the platform was wobbling in place.

“Talk to me,” Arturo said.

“We need to go—”

“And we will. But first tell me what’s wrong.”

He was probably worried I knew something he didn’t, that I had some plan I was hiding from him. “I swear, I’m not going to betray you.”

“I know,” he said. “I believe you.”

He seemed like he meant it, but he was still looking at me with concern. If he didn’t think I was going to betray them—

Arturo’s grip tightened on my shoulder. “Alanik—”

“They didn’t eject,” I said. It felt good to say it, like I was confessing some sin. “I shot down that ship and the pilot didn’t eject.”

“Oh,” Arturo said. He looked down at the ground. “You’d never killed before?”

“No,” I said. “We play *games* in our ships. We tag each other with *lasers*. I don’t know what I’m doing out there! And I *shot* someone down, and I *killed* them. And it shouldn’t matter, because they were the *enemy*, but—”

“I used to think like that,” Arturo said. “Before we knew who the Superiority were, when they were still a faceless evil. It didn’t hurt to kill them. Scud, it felt *good*. But now that I’ve seen their faces, some of them anyway—” He shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s not as easy anymore. Maybe it never should have been.”

“Easy seems better,” I said. “When the enemy shoots at you, you have to shoot back.”

“Then what you did was justified,” Arturo said. “But it *feels* terrible.”

“Yes,” I said. “It does.”

Saying that out loud steadied me a little. Arturo dropped his hand from my shoulder. I wished he hadn’t, because that was steadying me too.

“Can you fight?” Arturo asked.

If I didn’t, and some of my allies didn’t make it, I would never forgive myself. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, I want to help.”

Arturo leaned against the doorframe to the control room. “Jorgen needs to give the order to get back inside the platform. We got what we came for and now we need to *go*.”

“They’re working on it,” Rig said. “But a new flight of Unity ships showed up that’s doing a better job protecting the cytonic ships. If they don’t keep the enemy moving, the cytonics are going to get the inhibitor up and then we won’t be *able* to leave. They could use your help.”

The humans could hyperjump, but it would take precious minutes for them to collect all the Independence ships. They’d helped us do this, and we couldn’t leave them behind.

“Come on,” I said to Arturo. “Let’s get to our ships.”

We ran through the tunnels and the hangar. Arturo followed me to my ship, checking the damage to the landing gear as I climbed inside. He

leaned on my canopy and put a hand on my arm again. “Are you sure you can do this?”

If he were anyone else I would have shaken him off, but Arturo wasn’t being condescending. He was genuinely concerned.

“I’ll be fine as soon as I’m in the air,” I said.

He nodded. I thought maybe he respected that answer. “Good. Let’s get up there.”

Another burst of mindblades ripped through the space around the platform. I didn’t want to teleport us into the path of that, so I turned on my radio as Arturo and I hovered off the platform.

“—got ’em,” Rig was saying. “Jerkface, the enemy is circling around to your position.”

“Copy, Rig,” Jorgen replied. “I see them. Sentry, FM, head them off. I’ll ask some of the Independence pilots to help you.”

“We’re back, Jerkface,” I said. “This is Amphi”—I still couldn’t remember the rest of his name—“and...Angel.”

“Ooooh,” Sadie said. “Angel. That’s pretty.”

“Told you,” Arturo said.

I smiled. “Where should we jump to?”

“Welcome, Angel,” Jorgen said. “Come out on the treeward side. Your friend Quilan is over there with a bunch of Unity ships protecting him. The cytonic ships all seem to have gotten into position now.”

Which meant we needed to get out there immediately or we could be trapped.

“Copy that,” I said. I picked a spot between us and Tower, and beckoned Naga along with me as I hyperjumped.

I realized too late that I should have used Chubs. The malevolence of the eyes felt stronger than ever. We were angering them, drawing their wrath. They struck a chord with something primal that told me they meant me harm, and someday they were going to snatch me out of the sky and exact vengeance.

Arturo and I emerged from the negative realm in the airspace between the platform and Tower, and several ships immediately turned toward us.

*Alanik, Quilan said. Surrender your humans and I can argue for your pardon.*

They'd figured out who I was working with. I wondered if they'd gotten close enough to get a look, or just deduced.

*No, I told him. But I'll accept your surrender anytime.*

*Why would we offer a surrender when we're winning?*

"Cover me," I said to Arturo.

"On it," Arturo replied. I went into evasive maneuvers, diving past several of the ships as they came at us, pushing toward Quilan.

I reached into the negative realm to retort, and caught snatches of his voice.

*—have your humans— Quilan was saying. —to the Superiority—come and get—*

By the branches. He was going to turn us in *right now*. He had his bargaining chip—me, Rinakin, and our human allies—all out here in the open. He must have decided that was enough.

"Jerkface," I said over the radio. "Quilan is calling in the Superiority. I don't know how fast they can get here, but—"

*—holding out on us— the person Quilan was talking to responded. —measures, effective immediately—should have been more forthcoming—*

Quilan's voice sounded panicked as he answered. "*—just found them—told you everything we—have been perfectly loyal—*"

"I don't think it's going the way Quilan anticipated," I told Jorgen. "But I don't think it's going to turn out well for us either." At least if he was talking mind-to-mind he wasn't concentrating on the concussion field, though they might not need him for the inhibitor.

"It rarely does," Jorgen said. "Any idea what we're facing?"

"No," I said. "But—"

*Alanik, Quilan said. This is your fault. You brought this down on us. Surrender now, or—*

*Shut up,* I told Quilan, and he did, though I couldn't shake how *frightened* he felt out of my head.

What had the Superiority threatened him with that had him so shaken?

At that exact moment the universe went silent again. Tucked around my waist, Chubs let out a whimper.

“They’ve got the inhibitor up!” I said. “We need to get them out of formation or we can’t hyperjump out of here.” We could leave the platform, I supposed, and run for our lives. But we’d still need time for the humans to light-lance all the Independence ships. We might not all make it.

“Jerkface,” Nedd said over the radio. “We lost another one of the Independence ships. Kimmalyne had to fall back to reignite her shield, and we couldn’t keep them from—”

“Boomslug can’t fire the hyperweapon as long as that inhibitor is up,” Rig said. “I don’t know what else to do to help.”

The longer we let them maintain that formation, the longer Quilan would have to concentrate on getting a concussion field over the area, knocking out the Skyward and Independence pilots so they could be picked out of the air one by one.

And then on my sensor readout, something enormous appeared in the sky above us. I tilted my ship upward to get a better look through the canopy.

It was a Superiority ship. A battleship, judging by the enormous cannon pointed right at us.

At me and my allies. At my *people* on Tower.

“Jerkface?” Nedd said. “Are you seeing this?”

“I’m seeing it,” Jorgen said.

“Is that the one from Detritus?” FM asked.

“Looks like it,” Jorgen responded.

“I think so too,” Rig said. “That means those are planetary weapons.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked.

“It means ReDawn is in serious trouble,” Jerkface said. “Unless we can figure out how to take that ship out. Rig, do you think the mindblades are up to the task?”

“I don’t know,” Rig said. “We can’t use them with the inhibitor up.”

“We need to get those cytonics out of formation *now*,” Jorgen said.

“T-Stall and Catnip are trying to run one off,” Nedd said. “They need backup.”

Getting just one of the ReDawn cytonics out of position would disturb the inhibitor. I couldn't sense them anymore through the oppressive silence. "Where are the cytonic ships?" I asked.

"I see them," Arturo said. "Follow me."

"Copy that," Jerkface said. "All Skyward pilots are clear to provide backup."

Arturo took off beneath the platform and I followed. The Superiority wasn't going to extract the humans. They were going to shoot them down, right here near a population center. I didn't know how much damage that cannon could do.

And I didn't want to find out.

"Guys," Rig said over the radio. "You're going to want to listen to this."

Rinakin's voice came over the general channel. "People of ReDawn," he said. "You've all been deceived."

"Is that broadcasting generally?" Jorgen asked.

"Yes," Rig said. "He's broadcasting to the planet."

"This is a dark day in our history," Rinakin said. "Unity operatives kidnapped me and then had a Superiority agent take my place, giving you a message I myself would never give. The Superiority has turned on us, and now a battleship threatens Tower. But we will not give in, and we are not without support."

*Oh.* I saw what Rinakin was doing. I held my breath, following Arturo as he sped away from the platform out into the miasma. I could see the ships ahead now, T-Stall and Catnip contending with a group of Unity fighters.

"For today marks the historic reunification of our alliance with the humans," Rinakin said. "They've come to help us in our hour of need."

"Um, Jerkface?" Rig said. "Rinakin wants me to put you on—"

"On the radio?" Jorgen said. "What does he want me to—scud, okay, do it."

Above us, the cannon started to glow with an ominous blue light.

"They're going to fire on us," FM said. "We don't know how long the shield on the platform will hold, so we'd better be fast."

Arturo and I reached the ships and joined T-Stall and Catnip in a barrage of destructor fire. The other ships returned fire, while another ship darted away toward the platform.

That would be the ship with the cytonic, then. “This one,” I said to Arturo, then flipped back to the general channel.

“It is my pleasure to introduce to you Jorgen Weight, human of the planet Detritus, whose people have long struggled under Superiority oppression.”

“Um,” Jorgen said. “Hi. That’s me.”

An alert blinked—Arturo trying to get me on our private channel. I switched over. “Let’s split up and come at them from either side,” he said.

“Done,” I said, and we veered away from each other, still rocketing toward the ship with the cytonic.

“How long have you been fighting for your lives against the weapons of the Superiority?” Rinakin asked.

That was good. Put an emphasis on their violence. Pull the curtain back on their false peace.

“My whole life,” Jorgen said, sounding more sure of himself now. “Three generations, in fact. They beat us back, made us live underground. They’ve been trying to exterminate us. But we’re still here, and we’re still fighting.”

“Yeah, Jerkface!” Nedd said.

The Superiority ship let loose a blast from the cannon. The shield around the platform sputtered and sparked, but it held—for the moment at least.

“ReDawn is with you,” Rinakin said.

“Let it be so,” I said to myself.

“Let it be so!” Chubs repeated.

Arturo and I both opened fire on the ship with the cytonic. They dodged, but we wove with them, catching them with one blast, then two, then three. Their shield blinked out and I fired off one last hit—

And missed as I dodged a torrent of destructor fire coming at me from the side.

Quilan. *They’re going to destroy us all, Alanik*, he said. He had the key to speak inside the inhibitor, but I couldn’t answer because I didn’t. *And it’s*



*your fault.*

He fired on me and I dodged again. I'd lost track of the first cytonic ship, so I hoped Arturo still had it in his sights. Quilan bore down on me. He was bound and determined to blow me out of the sky.

But I wasn't going to let him best me. I executed a swivel turn and unloaded my destructors directly at his cockpit.

His shield fizzled and dissipated. His ship continued flying toward mine, so close that I could see him through the canopy as I fired the final shot. He pulled his nose up—

But he was too late. The destructor blast took off the nose of his ship and cleaved the cockpit in two. His ship plummeted out of the sky.

He didn't eject. I didn't think he could have survived that blast, but even if he had he wouldn't survive the fall.

He was the enemy. It should feel *good* to kill him.

*It's not as easy anymore,* Arturo had said. *Maybe it never should have been.*

I pulled up just in time to see Arturo, T-Stall, and Catnip all firing at the ship with the cytonic. Both the pilot and the cytonic ejected, and the ship fell out of the sky.

The universe buzzed to life around me.

The Superiority ship fired again. The shield around the platform blinked out of existence.

One more shot and it would be gone.

"Hyperweapon is back online!" Rig said. "Jerkface, should we hyperjump out?"

"If you do," I said, "can you be sure the Superiority ship won't fire on the tree?"

"Alanik is right," Jorgen said. "We need to finish this if we can, for ReDawn."

For ReDawn?

"For ReDawn!" Chubs said.

They were going to stay and help us. Even at so great a risk.

"Hang on, Rig," Jorgen said. "I think we need to get the cannon closer."

“You’re going to put the platform *closer* to the enormous gun?” FM said. “Isn’t that giving them an easier target?”

“I don’t want to miss,” Jorgen said. “Is the hyperdrive ready?”

“Ready,” Rig said.

And then the platform disappeared and resurfaced up in the sky, blocking my view of the battleship. The autoturrets fired.

“Weapons system ready,” Rig said. “Scud, they’re charging the gun again, Jerkface, so make it quick. I don’t think the turrets are going to be enough.” I lifted my nose and shot up through the atmosphere, cresting the edge of the platform just in time to see the mindblades ripple through the battleship, cutting the metal into long, thin strips. The cannon shattered apart, the energy it had been building crackling back on itself.

“Scud! Someone just landed outside,” Rig said. “I think we must have lost our inhibitor when the shield went down.”

“Jerkface?” FM said, sounding terrified.

“All ships, converge on Wandering Leaf,” Jorgen said. “Bounce protocol.”

I didn’t wait for him to send in the others. I sent an invitation to Naga and then prompted Chubs to hyperjump inside the hangar.

Another ship had landed ahead of me and I jumped out and followed its pilot toward the command room. It was a varvax—a crustacean species I’d learned about when I was preparing to go to Starsight—but it looked so strange out of its ship, walking in some kind of armor apparatus that looked like it was made from different types of stone.

I ran toward it, though what I was going to do against a creature in armor I had no idea. I knew less about hitting people than Arturo did.

The creature reached the doorway, far ahead of me.

“Boomslug, help!” Rig called from inside.

A torrent of force emanated from the command room and cut the armor of the varvax into pieces. The creature inside the armor scuttled out, and then disappeared into the negative realm again.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Rig said. He reached the doorway of the command room and knelt to pick up Boomslug. “I am going to get you a

whole crate of caviar, Boomslug. I promise.”

Boomslug nuzzled Rig, looking quite pleased with himself. And then FM came running up and threw her arms around both of them, knocking them hard against the doorframe.

“Don’t squeeze the slugs!” Jorgen said, running up right behind me. No one listened to him.

Arturo came up beside me, staring up through a skylight at the battleship that was breaking into pieces above us.

“Jerkface,” Sadie called from her ship. “We have incoming!”

I looked out through the entrance of the hangar and I could see them—numerous UrDail ships painted a bright blue.

More Independence fighters coming to our aid.

“We did it,” I said. The Superiority would surely come after us again, but we weren’t alone anymore.

## Twenty-two

“I don’t know if we need the backup,” Jorgen said, looking over Sadie’s shoulder at her sensor screen. “The Unity forces are retreating.”

“Thank the stars,” Arturo said.

I concurred. From inside the command center, I could hear Rinakin resuming his broadcast about the strength of ReDawn and her ability to resist. He seemed to be using the word progress a lot. I bet Nanalis was going to love that, but Rinakin’s broadcast would make certain that blame for the Superiority’s appearance fell squarely where it belonged.

“He’s going to want to parade you around at the Council tree,” I said to Jorgen. “You’re the hero of ReDawn now, apparently.”

Jorgen looked horrified, and I laughed.

“Hey,” Nedd said, coming up and slapping Jorgen on the back. “If you want, you can tell them I’m Jorgen Weight. I’ve always wanted to be in a parade.”

Jorgen looked like he might consider it. “We need to report to Cobb,” he said. “Tell Command we’ve been successful here. After that, hopefully we can go home. If I can talk some sense into my parents, maybe they’ll even send an official diplomatic coalition instead of a flight of pilots.”

Actual aid, and a renewal of our old alliance. I’d gone to the humans looking for help—but until this moment I don’t think I’d let myself believe help would actually come.

“Thank you,” I said to Jorgen, “for not abandoning my people to the Superiority when the inhibitor went down.”

Jorgen looked confused. “Of course,” he said. “That’s what an alliance is. It means we protect each other.”

So many of my own people backed down at the first sign of inconvenience that I’d expected the same of the humans. They could have left and waited out whatever that ship would have done to Tower in

retribution. They'd risked their own lives to save *my* people. They'd done it again and again.

I'd misjudged Jorgen. He was an incredible leader, and it was a privilege to fly with him.

"Yes," I said. "That's what an alliance is."

Jorgen still looked confused, like this was so obvious it didn't bear saying. "I'm going to try to reach Cobb on the hypercomm," he said. "We need to warn them about what the Superiority almost did to the people who were supposedly working with them." He ducked into the command center.

"I told you he wasn't going to turn on you," Arturo said. He leaned against the corridor wall, watching me.

"You did tell me that," I said. "But you also said you thought *I* was going to turn on you."

"I said I *didn't* think you would," Arturo said. "But that it was a possibility."

"I seem to remember you being very threatening," I returned. "And quite concerned."

Arturo grinned. "Fine. Maybe neither of us is a perfect judge of character."

"If I'd really believed you all weren't trustworthy," I said, "I never would have asked for your help to begin with."

"That's probably true," Arturo said. "Though did you have other options?"

"Not good ones," I admitted. "So thank you."

Arturo's expression grew serious. "You shot down that other cytonic," he said. "You knew him?"

I could still see Quilan's face as he bore down on me, destructors firing.

"I did," I said. "He was going to kill me, and I got him first."

"Right," Arturo said. "That seems like it should make it easier, doesn't it? But I've never had to shoot down someone I talked to. Someone I knew."

I wanted to say the world was better off without Quilan in it, but I wasn't sure that was true. My people had so few cytonics. We needed every one.

Maybe Rinakin was right. There was a place for persuasion. Quilan's death was a waste, of a leader as well as a cytonic. Killing him had been necessary, but everyone would have been better off if we could have persuaded him to change his mind to fight for our side.

Now he could never change his mind, and there was a kind of tragedy to that.

"I'm not glad he's dead," I said, "but I'm glad I'm still alive. I wish it had all gone differently, but I don't know what I would have changed, or if I even had the power to change it."

"You had the power to do something really good for your people and ours," Arturo said. "Does that make it feel better?"

I thought about that. "I don't know," I said. "But I don't regret it, I know that."

Arturo nodded. "Yeah. Neither do I."

He held my gaze for a moment, and something about the way he looked at me was thrilling and terrifying all at once. I followed after Jorgen into the control room.

Rinakin was finishing his broadcast. He slumped against the control panel, looking exhausted. His daughter stood by his side, urging him to come rest in one of the bunk rooms.

"We need to get him medical attention," she told me.

"I know," I said. "If the Independence medic can't care for him, we'll take him to a hospital soon." Rinakin's injuries didn't look life threatening, but he should still receive treatment.

Jorgen leaned against the wall by the hypercomm. The purple and orange slug from his ship was now in there, and he tapped his fingers on the control panel, waiting.

"Admiral Cobb will speak to you now," someone said, and then Cobb spoke through the hypercomm.

"Jorgen," he said. "It's about time you reported in."

Jorgen frowned. Cobb had told him *not* to call, hadn't he? Because he was trying to stay in good with the politicians, and not let anyone know he was involved in Skyward Flight's desertion.

“We’ve been successful here,” Jorgen said. “We were able to save Alanik’s people and establish an alliance with them.”

FM and Rig appeared in the doorway. Rig’s hair was a bit messier than normal, probably due to some human mating ritual. I was still fuzzy on the details of all that, but humans were clearly uncomfortable discussing these things, so I wasn’t going to ask.

Arturo at least had been open to talking about his former girlfriend when we spoke before. Though the idea of asking *him* about human mating rituals felt...disorienting.

“That’s good,” Cobb said. “I’d like you to return as soon as possible for a full report. And bring some representatives of the UrDail with you, if you would. We’d like to begin official talks with them.”

Jorgen looked over at me. “Is it safe, sir?”

“Of course. It’s perfectly safe. The shield is holding fine. You have nothing to worry about. I have new orders for you as soon as you can get your people back here.”

FM and Rig exchanged a glance.

“You said before that the UrDail should stay away,” Jorgen said. “Because you worried they might become a bargaining chip in the negotiations with the Superiority.”

“Oh,” Cobb said. He sounded surprised, like he’d wanted to pretend he’d never said that. “No, the negotiations are at an impasse. If you return immediately, I can—”

Jorgen pushed the mute button on the hypercomm. “Something’s up with Cobb,” he said.

“Is your mother in the room with him?” FM asked.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “But why would he respond to my call if my mother was right there?”

“Maybe he got the message that you’d tried to reach him in front of her,” Rig said. “So he didn’t have a choice.”

“Or maybe it’s not him,” I said.

The three of them stared at me.

“What?” Jorgen said.

They didn't know. We hadn't had time to tell them. "The Superiority stole the holographic technology from Spensa's ship. The Rinakin who was working with Unity was a fake—a Superiority plant. If they did that to us..."

"Scud," Jorgen said. "You think maybe this *isn't Cobb*?"

"Cobb didn't behave like himself when we saw him last," FM said. "I assumed there must be an explanation."

"I think Alanik just gave us one," Jorgen said.

"Jorgen?" Cobb said over the hypercomm. "Are you still there?"

Jorgen turned on the microphone again. I'd missed the last thing Cobb had said, and I didn't think he'd paid attention to it either. "I'm here, sir," Jorgen said. "I'd like to speak to my mother, if that's all right."

That was a good move. Jeshua might not be helpful when it came to diplomacy, but she'd surely be on our side if she knew she was dealing with a Superiority fake.

"You'll have to be sure she's not also a plant," I whispered, and Jorgen nodded.

"You can talk to her when you return," Cobb said. "I need you here immediately. That is an order."

Jorgen muted the microphone again. "This has to be a trap."

"It sounds like it," I said.

Jorgen swore and turned on the microphone again. "Sir, I'm ordering our people to prepare to return," he said. "It may take us a bit to gather the UrDail delegation together."

"Get here as soon as you can," Cobb said.

"I will. Thank you, sir." Jorgen turned off the microphone. "I need to communicate with my mother somehow. Warn her and the assembly that the Superiority has infiltrated the DDF."

"What do you think they did with real Cobb?" FM asked.

"They probably replaced him when they met for peace talks," Rig said. "Right after you left for ReDawn. We worried it might be a trap, but Cobb and Jeshua went anyway because the offer to negotiate a truce was too good



to refuse. And they didn't want to let them *inside* the shield because that could potentially be worse."

"That sounds like the Superiority," I said. "They pretended to talk about peace and used the opportunity to undermine you."

"So Cobb has been in their custody for a while," FM said. "Do you think they'll hurt him?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," I said.

"I can't contact my mother directly," Jorgen said. "She's not cytonic."

"We could contact Spensa's grandmother," I said. "She might know something, since the Superiority is demanding your cytonics. They might have collected her by now."

"Yes," Jorgen said. "That's true."

I was already reaching out through the negative realm, finding Detritus and canvassing the planet. I found Gran-Gran's mind far enough from the planet that she had to be in a ship.

That wasn't a good sign.

*Gran-Gran, I said, It's Alanik. Are you all right?*

*These vat-suckers are looking to trade me for their own freedom,* Gran-Gran said.

*Who's trying to trade you?* I asked.

*Some bottom-feeders from the National Assembly,* Gran-Gran said.

*Is Jeshua Weight with them?*

*She is,* Gran-Gran said. *War hero my wrinkled behind. They've brought that blue alien too, and the alien isn't happy about it.*

Cuna was a defector from the Superiority, so it made sense that the Superiority would also want them turned over. Gran-Gran seemed to understand what was happening at least.

*Where have they brought you?* I asked.

*They've got us on a ship taking us to some delegation,* she said. *They're dressed to the nines too, like they're meeting royalty.*

Oh no. "They've got Gran-Gran and Cuna on a ship en route to some delegation with the Superiority," I said. "Your mother is there, and some people from the assembly."

Jorgen swore. “That has to be a trap too. Tell her to tell them to turn around.”

Of course. *Tell them it's a trap. The Superiority isn't going to work with them. They've replaced Admiral Cobb with a Superiority operative using a holographic disguise. They offered progress to my planet and then turned their guns on them instead. Tell them nothing will come of this but ruin.*

*I'll tell them,* Gran-Gran said. *But they didn't listen to me before and they aren't going to listen to me now.*

“She says she’ll tell them,” I said. “But she doesn’t think they’ll listen.”

“She’s probably right.” Jorgen squeezed his eyes shut in frustration. “Do they have a hypercomm on board?”

I searched the area near Gran-Gran. I could sense taynix, all clustered together like they were trapped in some kind of container. “They have a box with slugs in it,” I said. And another one alone, sitting a few feet from the others. I probed at its mind, trying to send it coordinates to talk to our hypercomm, and it felt receptive, like it understood the message.

I did the same with the slug in our hypercomm. “Try it now,” I said. “I think you’ll be able to talk to them.”

“Mom?” Jorgen said into the hypercomm.

There was a beat of silence, and then, “Jorgen?” Jeshua Weight said.

“Mom,” Jorgen said. “You have to turn the ship around. You’re walking into a trap.”

“*We’re walking into a trap? You fled the planet against orders. Where are you?*”

“ReDawn,” Jorgen said. “We negotiated that alliance. We have people willing to work with us against the Superiority.”

“Then you’re undermining everything we’ve been working for here,” Jeshua said. “We’ve met with the Superiority, and they want to arrange a treaty.”

“I don’t think they do—” Jorgen said, but his mother cut him off.

“I think they’re being sincere,” Jeshua said. They always did—that was the problem. So many people couldn’t taste the poison past the sweetness of the tea. “We can’t keep fighting like this. We’ve been losing the war for

years. If there's a chance we can save our people's lives, we have to take it."

"Mom, they replaced Cobb," Jorgen said. "He's a Superiority operative wearing a hologram like the one Spensa used to infiltrate Starsight."

Jeshua was quiet for a moment. "Are you sure?" she asked. "You saw this?"

"No," Jorgen said. "But they used the same trick on someone here, and when we talked to him something was off about him."

"Jorgen, I've been with Cobb for the last two days. He's tired like we all are, but it's him."

Jorgen hit the edge of the control board with the heel of his hand. "It *isn't*, Mom. You can't go to that delegation. You're walking into a trap."

A man's voice came over the radio. "Jorgen," he said, "I know this is all hard for you to accept. We raised you to hate the Krell. We've hated them all our lives. But son, if we keep fighting them you're going to die up there some day. That's what we're trying to prevent. The Superiority is offering to *train* you. This is a huge opportunity, and you need to try to accept it."

"They tried to kill me today," Jorgen said. "They're *lying* when they offer us peace."

"You should never have gone to ReDawn." Now Jeshua was talking again. "Can't you see we're trying to keep you safe?"

Jorgen muted the mic again and swore, covering his eyes with his hands.

Arturo appeared in the doorway. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"No," I said. "The Superiority replaced Cobb, same as they did Rinakin, and Jorgen's parents are taking Gran-Gran and Cuna to a meeting with the Superiority right now."

"Scud," Arturo said. "We have to stop them. We can't let them walk into that."

In my mind, Gran-Gran and the tiny slug presences stopped moving, as if they'd arrived at their destination.

"I think they may already be there," I said.

"We need to go now," Jorgen said. "We're taking the whole platform. We'll come back to finish the alliance with Alanik's people, but for now we

may need the air support.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Rig was already putting Drape back in the hyperdrive box.

“Alanik,” Jorgen said. “Can you give him coordinates near where Gran-Gran is?”

“Yes,” I said, and I stretched myself across the space between galaxies, pinpointing her location and then sending it to Drape.

“Ready,” I said.

“Drape,” Rig said. “Go.”

We slid into the negative realm beneath the distracted eyes, which then shifted into glittering stars as the entire platform came out the other side in the airspace around Detritus.

A small human passenger ship was docked at the outside of a boxy Superiority transport ship a couple kilometers away. The transport ship wasn’t nearly as big as some I’d seen arrive at ReDawn, not even as big as Wandering Leaf.

“You’re going to need backup,” FM said. I didn’t think FM and Jorgen had really resolved their issues with each other, but that didn’t seem to matter to either of them at the moment.

“We are,” Jorgen said. “I want the rest of you in your ships, ready to fight in case we need additional air support. It doesn’t *look* like they brought fighters, but they could hyperjump them in at any moment.”

“Okay,” FM said.

Jorgen turned to Arturo. “You command the flight while I’m in there. Make sure everyone’s ready to go on my signal.”

Arturo looked at me, and I thought maybe he’d been planning to volunteer to go with us to the Superiority ship. I wished he would. “Got it,” he said, and he spun around from the doorway, moving toward the hangar. “Skyward Flight,” he yelled, “everyone to your ships!”

The flight scattered. “I’ll get Boomslug back in the weapons system,” Rig said.

“Good,” Jorgen said. “Alanik, you don’t sense any cytonic inhibitors on that ship, do you?”

“No,” I said. “Not yet.”

Rig handed him Snuggles, and Jorgen slipped him into his sling. “Alanik,” Jorgen said, “can you give Snuggles directions to the command room on Platform Prime?”

“Yes,” I said. “But I can’t jump us into the Superiority ship afterward. I’m not familiar with it, so I could end up materializing us in the middle of a wall.”

“The taynix seem to be able to avoid that,” FM said. “You said they took some of the taynix with them, right? Could you hyperjump to them?”

“We’ll have to try it,” Jorgen said.

“It would probably be the ones issued to the other pilots,” FM said. “The ones who didn’t come with us. Try Corgi or Snide, or maybe Waffle or Pipsqueak.”

Jorgen blinked at her. “I’ll...try to remember that.”

“You’d better,” I said. “Are you ready now?”

Jorgen closed his eyes, like he was steeling himself for battle. “Ready,” he said.

I put a hand on his shoulder and sent Snuggles the coordinates for the room where I’d met with Cobb and Jeshua.

## Twenty-three

We emerged next to the conference table where Jeshua Weight had turned down my offer of an alliance. The room was empty, and Jorgen strode out the door, moving with purpose. I followed behind him as he walked up the hall—he knew where he was going better than I did.

A man sitting behind a desk looked up and visibly startled.

“I need to talk to Cobb,” Jorgen said. “I’m to report to him immediately. Is he here?”

“Of course,” the man said. “Hold on a moment.” He went to the door behind him and knocked, then opened it. “Jorgen Weight to see you,” he said.

Admiral Cobb shuffled to the door immediately, looking over the shoulder of the receptionist at Jorgen and me. “Stars, I’m glad you’re back,” Cobb said.

I could see Jorgen scrutinizing him. This man had Cobb’s cane and his limp. His voice sounded the same to me, but so had Rinakin’s.

Jorgen closed the distance between them, and I stayed close. I wasn’t going to be left behind. Jorgen put a hand on Cobb’s arm and slid his sleeve up just enough to reveal the bracelet on his wrist. It was identical to the one not-Rinakin had been wearing.

“What are you—” fake Cobb began.

“Snuggles, take us to Corgi,” Jorgen said.

“Corgi!” Snuggles said.

A moment later we materialized in front of a very startled-looking pilot who was lying on a bunk with his jumpsuit half off, taking a nap.

Oh. Apparently Jeshua hadn’t taken *all* the slugs we’d left behind with her.

“Hey—” fake Cobb shouted, but Jorgen didn’t give him a chance to finish.

“Snuggles, take us to Snide!” he shouted.

“Snide!” Snuggles said.

We passed beneath the eyes, and then suddenly we stood in a storage room on an unfamiliar ship, next to a box containing several small cytonic minds.

I could feel Gran-Gran moving away from us. There were a few other taynix on this ship in other directions, probably powering Superiority hyperdrives or hypercomms.

Fake Cobb recovered enough to wrench himself away from Jorgen and move toward the doorway, but Jorgen caught him by the back of the neck, shoving him to the ground and then twisting his arms behind his back.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he said.

“I’m your commander,” fake Cobb said.

Jorgen didn’t even bother responding.

“They took Gran-Gran in that direction,” I said, pointing.

“I think my parents’ ship must be docked nearby,” Jorgen said. “Let’s split up. I’ll find my parents and prove to them that they’ve walked into a trap. You retrieve Gran-Gran and then hyperjump to me.” He opened the crate of slugs and handed one to me. “I think that’s Snide,” he said. “If we stop being able to find each other, we’ll know the other got caught in an inhibitor and come help. Does that work?”

“Yes,” I said. I moved up to the door, peering through a small window to see if there was anyone there. The hallway was empty, so we moved out of the storage room, heading in two different directions.

This whole ship made my skin crawl. I wished I didn’t have to do this alone. The taynix—Snide—snuggled into the crook of my elbow, as if it felt the same.

Gran-Gran and whoever was moving her away from here had to be ahead, but I didn’t see or hear evidence of anyone else. The ship was eerily empty, like it had only a skeleton crew aboard. If they really believed the humans were so aggressive, why hadn’t they brought more forces?

*Gran-Gran, I said through the negative realm. I’m here on the ship, coming toward you. Where are they taking you?*

*To a holding cell, they say, Gran-Gran said. I spat in one of their eyes. I don't think they liked that much.*

I smiled. The more I got to know Gran-Gran, the more I liked her. *How many of them are there?*

*Two diones, she said. One with me, and one with Cuna. But I'm hoping they'll take me to Cobb. I think I can hear him.*

Cobb was here? I'd assumed they would have transported him away already. *Hear him?* I said. *Through the negative realm?* That didn't make sense. Cobb wasn't cytonic. It shouldn't be possible for her to find him. I searched over the area where she was headed myself, but I couldn't feel anything except a couple of taynix.

*Yes, I'm sure it's him. He's just up ahead. Not like those other voices, the quiet ones. Are they your people?*

*My people?* What voices was she hearing? I knew she was an old woman, but had she lost her mind?

*Yes, those voices. They're asking me for help.*

*I don't know who those are,* I said. *You probably shouldn't answer them, just in case. I'm coming to get you, but they might have inhibitors on this ship. Those will cut off the use of your powers. You may want to get out now.*

*I'm certain Cobb is there,* Gran-Gran said. *I want to bring him with me. I don't know if I can travel the way you and Spensa do, but some things feel so real in there—I think I can try.*

It was a risk, but I could hardly blame her for that. *I'll follow until you're out. And then return to help Jorgen. If you can't manage the hyperjump or you get inhibited, I'll come to help you.*

*Thank you,* Gran-Gran said. *I can tell by your spirit that you have the heart of a warrior like my granddaughter.*

I felt oddly touched by that, even though I barely knew either of them. I continued to move down the hall, peering around corners to make sure no one was there.

The ship continued to be empty, which made me more and more uneasy.



*We've reached the holding cells,* Gran-Gran said in my mind. *Cobb is here. Stars, he looks bad.*

*But he's alive?* I asked.

*He's alive. I don't know what they've done to him, but—*

Gran-Gran's voice cut off as a section of the ship ahead went dead in my mind. I couldn't reach Gran-Gran anymore—she'd disappeared beneath an inhibitor cloud.

I needed to get there quickly and see if I could disable it. I hurried around a corner—

And then ducked back at the sound of voices. There were people ahead, though I wasn't yet close to the inhibited area of the ship. I didn't understand much of the dialect they were speaking, and they were too far away from me for my pin to translate. But I did catch a few words I recognized.

*Ready. Hurry. Leaving.*

These people *were* leaving. Running in the opposite direction, away from the center of the ship.

What were they trying to get away from so fast?

I needed to get to Gran-Gran, Cobb, and Cuna, but something was very wrong here and I wanted to know what it was. *Did you find your parents?* I asked Jorgen.

*Not yet,* Jorgen said. *Took a wrong turn. Moving toward them now. Fake Cobb is dragging his feet, slowing me down.*

I wanted to suggest that he break fake Cobb's legs, but that probably wouldn't help them move any faster.

*I know where Gran-Gran and real Cobb are,* I said. *Cuna is with them too. Will get them in a moment. Need to check on something first.*

*Copy,* Jorgen said. *Keep me informed.*

I moved in the direction the fleeing people had come from. At the end of a short hall, I found a door with a heavy handle that was closed and locked. I listened; no noise came from inside and no light was visible under the door.

I reached through the door, feeling the space beyond through the negative realm, and then hyperjumped through.

I emerged in a dark room and immediately felt the wall for a light panel. The room lit up, and there in the center of the large room was a taynix box with wires and equipment mounted to the outside.

I took a step toward it, and then paused. The device was hooked up to a large tube with a wide-open end aimed at the wall. It looked suspiciously like a cannon—

And in the box attached to it I could feel the tiny cytonic mind of a taynix.

Oh *no*. The Superiority operatives had said something was “ready” and they needed to “hurry” and get away from it. They had a mindblade weapon, and instead of aiming it into the sky to shoot us down they had it aimed toward the *center* of the ship itself.

It was a *bomb*, and it was rigged to explode.

I was out of my depth here, but I knew where to go for help. *The ship has a bomb on it*, I sent to Jorgen. *I’m going to get Rig*. I gave Snide the coordinates for the control room on Wandering Leaf.

Rig let out an undignified scream, which the slug in his sling promptly echoed. “Scud!” he said. “I will never get used to you doing that!”

I wondered if FM got that reaction when she and Gill snuck around to see him. There wasn’t time to talk about it now. “Come with me,” I said, and reached for his arm, then directed Snide to take us back.

We appeared again in the room next to the taynix bomb.

“I want to tell you to warn me before you do that,” Rig said, squeezing his eyes shut. “But I suppose you did.”

I gestured at the device. “We’re in the Superiority ship,” I said. “This is a bomb, isn’t it? Can you defuse it?”

“Can I *what*?” Rig looked over the equipment, and I watched his face contort in horror as he came to the same conclusions I had. “I don’t know anything about bombs! I’m not qualified to deal with this.”

None of us were qualified, but I couldn’t let the Superiority blow up the ship with people inside. “What if we break the box?” I said. “If we remove

the taynix—”

“The box is rigged to prevent tampering,” Rig said, looking it over. “I don’t know how it works, but I can tell that much. Alanik, I’m sorry. I can’t fix it. We need to get off this ship immediately.”

I understood. There was nothing he could do. “Can you get yourself back?” I asked. “I’ll go for Jorgen and the others.”

Rig nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Go,” I said.

“Drape, take me to Gill,” he said.

“Gill!” Drape said. And then Rig disappeared, back to Wandering Leaf.

I tore off down the hallway in the direction of the cytonic inhibitor while simultaneously reaching out to Jorgen. *You need to get out of here. Can you get to your parents?*

*Working on it,* Jorgen said. *The Superiority people took them into a room, but it’s locked. I’m moving around to the other side, trying to find an open door. Fake Cobb is not helping.*

Near Jorgen, I could feel a new patch of dead space—another inhibitor had been turned on near him, probably in the room with the human politicians. Even if I left Gran-Gran, Cuna, and real Cobb to join him, I couldn’t jump in and get them.

*Work fast,* I said. *We have to get out of here.*

I raced past closed doorways to a side hall ahead, and found a series of rooms with windows in the walls. Cuna was in one and Gran-Gran and Cobb in another, but as soon as I moved close to them the sounds of the universe quieted.

Cobb looked awful—he had bruises down his face, and he sat slumped against the wall like he was having trouble holding himself in a sitting position. Gran-Gran knelt over him, and Cuna stood in the other cell, motioning to me.

“Alanik!” they yelled through the glass. “I don’t know what Winzik plans to do with us—”

“He plans to blow us up!” I yelled as I moved by. “We’re working on it.” I hauled open the doors at the end of the hall, searching for the inhibitor. I

found a custodial closet and a room with a couple of old broken chairs. At the end of the hall was another door, this one locked.

I stepped back and kicked it with all my might. The handle snapped on the third blow, and I tore it off and dragged the door open.

There, inside, was a taynix box. I opened it, and a blue and green slug tumbled to the floor.

The cytonic inhibition faded. *Alanik*, Jorgen said in my mind. *I can't get to them. The Superiority people all fled, and you disappeared, and I can't—*

*On my way*, I said. I didn't waste time running down the hall again. I hyperjumped back to the room with Cuna and grabbed them roughly by the arm.

*Get Cobb out*, I sent to Gran-Gran. She must have already been prepared to do so, because they disappeared before I even finished the thought. So she *could* hyperjump. That was good. One less thing for me to do in the unknown time before this ship exploded.

"Snide, take me to Drape," I said, and Cuna and I passed beneath the unseeing eyes as we jumped to the control room on Wandering Leaf. I deposited Cuna at the feet of a somewhat-less-surprised Rig, and then Snide and I hyperjumped back to the Superiority transport ship, this time to the storage room where we'd landed originally.

I took off at a run toward the area of the ship where I could sense Jorgen. I could feel his panic even before I reached him. He stood in a narrow observation room overlooking a tiered meeting hall that was clearly designed for a large assembly of people. Fake Cobb seemed to have escaped from Jorgen, because I didn't see him here. There were a dozen or so humans on the other side of the window, including Jeshua Weight, who stood right against the glass. One of the other humans—a man who looked like an older version of Jorgen—hefted one of the chairs and threw it at the glass.

It must have been some kind of reinforced plastic, because it didn't break.

"Humans of Detritus!" a voice said. It was coming from a loudspeaker inside the room, but was loud enough that we could hear it even from here.

“For your years of resistance, you have been judged too aggressive to live. You will meet your end for the good of all. In our graciousness, we will end your lives swiftly. Your pain will be brief. Your deaths will be broadcast to your planet, so that they may mourn you. You may have a moment to say your goodbyes.”

“How benevolent of them,” I said.

Jorgen beat his fists against the window. Inside the room, I could see the politicians starting to panic.

As they should. We couldn’t get them out of there. The Superiority might be satisfied with merely enslaving my people, but the humans?

Them they were going to destroy.

“We have to find that inhibitor,” I said, and Jorgen nodded, moving toward the doorway.

I tore down the hallway in the opposite direction. But there weren’t many crevices in this part of the ship—and all the other inhibitors had been *inside* the zone they inhibited, not outside of it. While there was a door on every side, they were all locked, and reinforced far better than the closet.

I ran the circle around the meeting room until I met up with Jorgen, and then we double-checked the areas we’d each checked before.

None of the doors would give, no matter how hard we beat on them.

When we reached the viewing room again, Jeshua still stood at the glass. She turned around, glaring at Jorgen.

“Look for a box,” he shouted through the glass at her. “A box with a taynix in it!”

*Go*, she mouthed at him.

Jorgen shook his head, beating on the glass with his fists again.

“Go!” Jeshua yelled through the glass at Jorgen. Her voice was faint, but I could make out what she said next. “Do better than we did.”

We weren’t going to be able to save them. There was nothing more we could do here.

I put a hand on Jorgen’s shoulder. He still had Snuggles in his sling. He didn’t need me to pull him out.

“She’s right,” I said. “We have to go.”

“No!” Jorgen shouted. There were tears running down his cheeks now.

He wasn’t going to leave, but I couldn’t let him die here.

I didn’t take chances with the slug. I reached through the negative realm to the hangar on Wandering Leaf, and I pulled.

Through the negative realm, I heard a scream.

# Epilogue

The wrath of the eyes bore down on me as I floated beneath their ever-present glares. But I could barely feel it, consumed as I was by the full force of Jorgen's pain, his anger, even his resentment of me for tearing him away from there. I choked on it, feeling every ounce of it down to my bones.

We fell out of the negative realm and the feeling faded, but the echoes of it lingered, as if I'd just watched my own parents die.

The members of Skyward Flight were climbing out of their ships, moving toward the windows near the entrance of the hangar to watch the Superiority ship as it tore itself to shreds, its hull ripped apart, its engine systems exploding in silent clouds of dust and smoke. Cuna stood off to the side, staring out at the remains of the Superiority ship as they scattered across the backdrop of stars.

Jorgen made a strangled sound and most of the flight turned around and saw us there, shock and relief reflecting across their faces. Arturo closed his eyes, like he'd been sure we were both gone and had to steady himself for a moment. Rig hurried down the tunnel from the control room behind us. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know what to do with it, I—"

"It wasn't your fault," I said. And that was true.

This was the Superiority's fault. Every bit of it.

Jorgen stared out at the pieces of the ship as they spiraled outward, shrapnel spreading in every direction. His face was like a statue, though I'd felt the grief he was holding in.

"Did Gran-Gran—" Rig asked.

"She got out," I said. "So did Cobb. I saw them." I scanned over the planet, searching in the negative realm for another cytonic mind, but I couldn't feel one. I reached out farther, searching for Gran-Gran—or even for Cobb, who Gran-Gran said she could feel in the negative realm though I'd been sure he wasn't cytonic.

I couldn't find them. They weren't here. And there were no dead spaces left that would hide them.

"They made it out," I said. "But...I don't know where they are."

"At least they weren't here," FM said. She put a hand on Jorgen's shoulder, but he shook her off.

"We're going down to Platform Prime," Jorgen said.

"Okay," FM said, "but I think you need to stop for a minute—"

"*Now*," Jorgen said. "I'm sorry, Alanik. We'll be a little late returning to ReDawn." He turned and looked at the floating pieces of ship, the place where both his parents had died. "There are some things we need to take care of first."





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Peter

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Janci Patterson writes in a variety of genres, so whatever you're looking for, she's probably got something you'll like. Her first book, *Chasing the Skip*, was published by Henry Holt in 2012. After publishing several contemporary YA novels and the YA paranormal A Thousand Faces trilogy, Janci discovered a love of collaboration and has written books with Megan Walker, Lauren Janes, James Goldberg, and Brandon Sanderson.

Janci lives in Utah with her mini-painting husband, Drew Olds, and their two awesome kids. She has an MA in creative writing from Brigham Young University. When she's not writing, Janci enjoys turn-based RPGs, miniatures board games, Barbie repaints, and playing with her border collie.

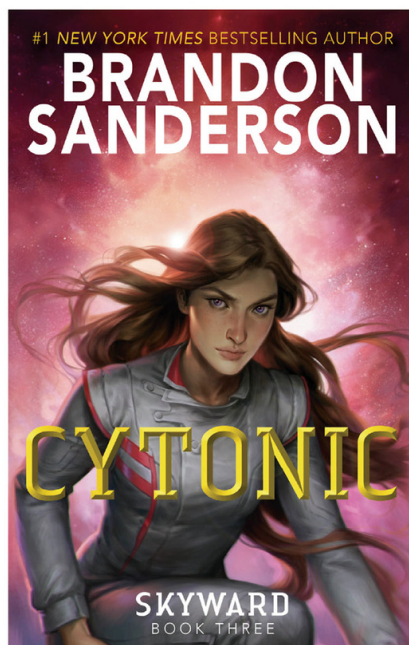
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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Books by Brandon Sanderson](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#)

## [Part One](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Interlude](#)

## [Part Two](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Interlude](#)

## [Part Three](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Interlude](#)

## [Part Four](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Interlude](#)

## [Part Five](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Epilogue](#)

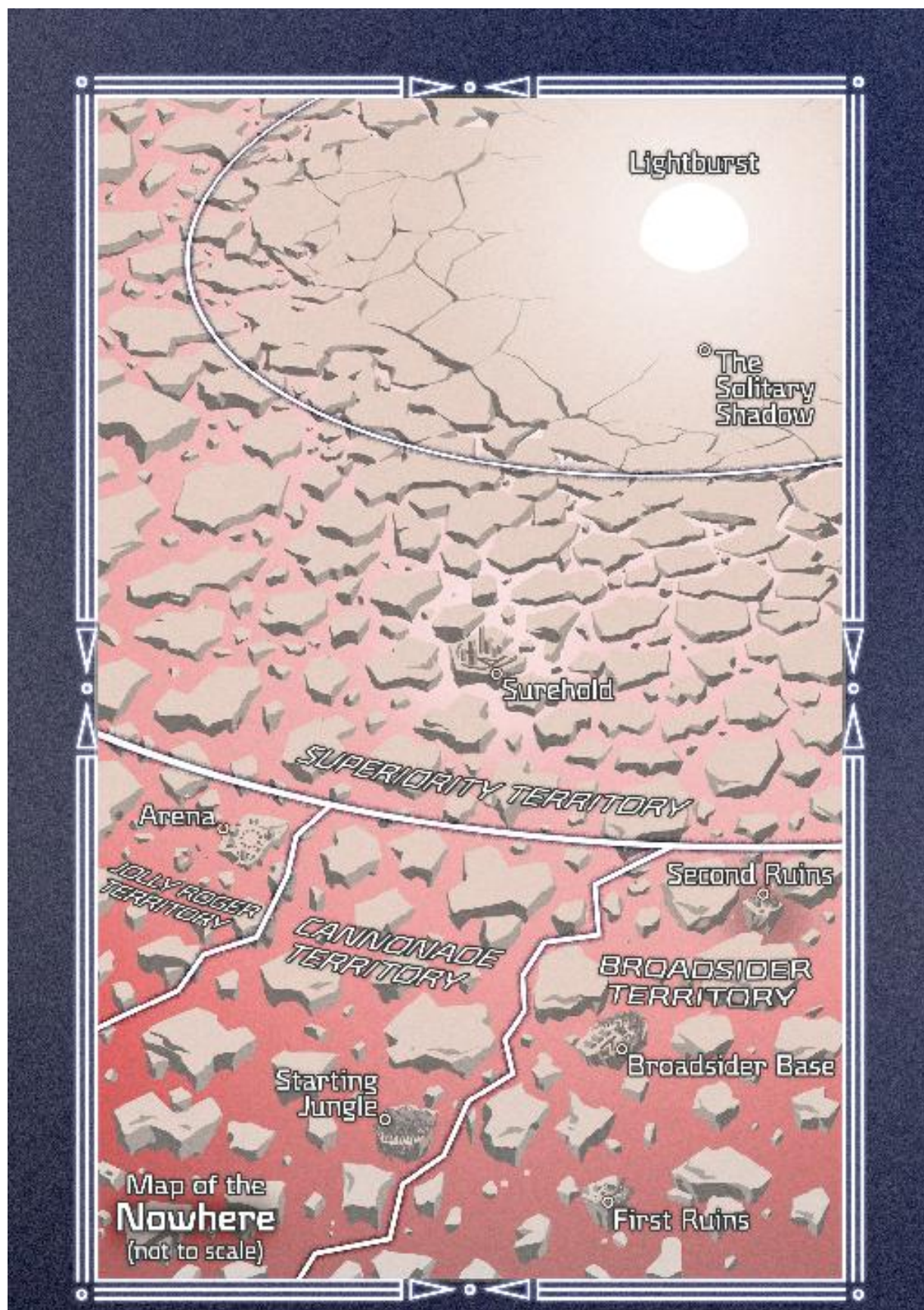
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**For Darci Rhoades Stone,**

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# PROLOGUE

A dark sphere appeared before me in the center of the room.

Scud. Was I really going to do this? In my hand, Doomslug fluted nervously.

The sterile whitewashed walls, enormous one-way mirror, and metal tables marked this as some kind of scientific facility. I was on Starsight: the massive space station that housed the regional offices of the Superiority. Up until this past year, I'd never even *heard* of the Superiority, let alone understood the nuances of how it—as a galactic government—ruled hundreds of different planets and species.

To be honest, I *still* didn't understand those nuances. I'm not exactly a “there are nuances to this situation” type of girl. I'm more of an “if it's still moving, you didn't use enough ammunition” type of girl.

Fortunately, nuance wasn't needed at the moment. The Superiority was undergoing a violent military coup. And the new people in charge did *not* like me. The shouts of the soldiers calling to one another as they searched the facility for me grew louder.

Hence the dark sphere. My only way out was to open a portal to another dimension. I thought of it as the nowhere.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “My thoughts...they're speeding up?”

He hovered nearby, having stuffed himself into a little drone. It was shaped vaguely like a box with wings and a pair of grabber arms on the sides. Two tiny acclivity rings—blue stones that glowed when powered—allowed it to hover, one beneath each wing.

“Um,” he said, “that does *not* look safe.”

“They use these nowhere portals to mine acclivity stone,” I said. “So there must be a way to return once you go through. Maybe I can get us back with my powers.”

The shouts outside were getting closer; there were no other options. I couldn’t use my powers to hyperjump out of this place, not with the shield that protected the station.

“Spensa!” M-Bot said. “I feel very uncomfortable with this!”

“I know,” I said, slinging my gun over my shoulder by its strap so I could grab his drone by the bottom of its chassis. Then—M-Bot in one hand, Doomslug in the other—I touched the dark sphere, and was sucked through to the other side of eternity.

In a flash I was in a place where time, distance, and *matter itself* didn’t exist. Here I was formless, a mind—or an essence—with no body. It was as if I were a starship floating in an endless blackness with no stars—with nothing at all to interrupt my view. Every time I hyperjumped using my powers, I briefly passed through this place. I was accustomed to the sensation, but it wasn’t familiar. Just...slightly less terrifying than it used to be.

Immediately I reached my mind out, searching for Detritus—my home. I’d begun to understand my powers in the most basic of ways. I couldn’t go many places with them, but I *did* know how to get home. Usually.

This time...I strained... Could I do it? Could I hyperjump to Detritus? The blackness around me seemed to stretch, and I could see white spots in the distance. One of those was...Gran-Gran?

If I could connect with her, I thought I could pull myself to her. I pushed harder, but grew worried that I’d draw attention. The delvers lived here. And as soon as I thought of them, I became aware of their presence out there in the darkness. All around me, yet invisible for now.

They didn’t seem to have noticed me yet. In fact...they were fixated on something else.

Pain. Terror.

Something was in *pain* in here. Something familiar.

*The delver. The one I'd prevented from destroying Starsight. It was here in this place, and it was afraid. As I focused on it, it appeared as a white point much brighter than Gran-Gran. It had noticed me.*

*Please...help...*

Delver communication never manifested as actual words; my mind simply translated the impressions, the images, as words. This one needed my help. The others were trying to destroy it.

I didn't think. Instinctively, I shouted into the nowhere.

*HEY!*

Hundreds of bright white spots opened around me. The eyes. I could feel their attention on me now, knowing me. The one they'd been fixated on hovered around the outside.

As always, the sight of all those eyes intimidated me. Yet I was a different person now. I'd spoken to one of their kind, *connected* with it. I'd persuaded it to turn its appetite away from the people of Starsight—by showing the delver that they were alive.

I just needed to do the same thing here. *Please*. I projected my thoughts toward those eyes, showing them calm understanding, not fear: *I am a friend. I am like you. I think. I feel.*

I did exactly what I'd done before. The eyes stirred and quivered, agitated. A few drew closer, and I could feel their scrutiny. Followed by... an emotion, so much more powerful. Pervasive, overwhelming, omnipresent.

Hatred.

The delvers—there was no telling how many—accepted that I was alive. Because of my cytonic abilities, they understood *me* to be a person. Their hatred changed to disgust. Anger. It was *worse* to know I was alive. It meant the things that had been encroaching upon their realm—persistently bothering them—were self-aware. We weren't mere insects.

We were invaders.

I tried again, more desperate this time. They rebuffed me. As if...they'd seen what I'd done to the one of their kind, and had prepared themselves to resist the same sort of approach.

I recoiled at the wave of their terrible anger. And I heard a terrified scream. Doomslug? Her shout projected something into my brain, a location.

Home.

The delvers withdrew. I unnerved them, it seemed. They hadn't expected to find me here. That gave me an opening.

Thanks to Doomslug, I could feel the path. I could get to Detritus. I could see Gran-Gran, and...and Jorgen. Scud, I missed him. I wanted to be near him again, talk to him again. I needed to get home to my friends and help them. The war was going to escalate now that Winzik had seized control of the Superiority.

I almost hyperjumped. But I lingered. Something held me back. An impression, an instinct.

*What am I?* that singular delver projected in a pleading tone. *What are WE?*

*I'm Spensa Nightshade, I sent to it. A pilot.*

*Is that all?*

It used to be all I cared about. But now...now I'd discovered another side to me. Something frightening, something I didn't completely understand.

*There is a way to learn, the delver sent. In this place. We call it the nowhere. You sensed that, didn't you?*

Yes, I had. But I didn't want to stay here. I tried to put that option out of my mind. I needed to go home.

But...did my people need me? Just another pilot? I visualized something then. A projection of my own fears? Maybe it was an effect of the nowhere. I saw myself return and rejoin Skyward Flight, fighting...and failing. Failing when the delvers inevitably returned, because a fighter pilot—no matter how skilled—couldn't defeat them. Failing when the Superiority marshaled the power of its cytonics, hyperjumping whole fleets. Worse, they could manipulate cytonics such as me, exploit weaknesses in our powers.

They'd done that to my father. Turned him against his own flight. Led him to death.

I was a pilot, yes. But pilots weren't enough.

We knew so little about any of this. We didn't understand what the delvers were. How could we hope to fight them? We didn't understand cytonics—up until recently, we'd considered those who had these powers to be “defects.” How could I face opponents like Brade, skilled with their talents, if I ran from who I was?

Home called to me, and I yearned to return. But home didn't have answers.

*Can you show me?* I asked the delver. *What I am?*

*Maybe. I don't even know what I am. There is a place we can learn, a place in the nowhere. A place where...we were all...born...*

*There are no places in the nowhere,* I sent.

*Not in its heart, no. But at the fringes there are settlements.*

I saw the meaning—the delver spoke of a region where acclivity stone was mined. Another mystery I had never quite understood. How did people go into the nowhere and harvest that rock, if the nowhere was a formless void?

Yes, there were actual places on the fringes. Places important to cytonics. Important to me. The delver put one of these locations into my mind.

I hung trapped between two opposite pulls. One, my desire to go home, to hold Jorgen, to laugh with my friends. The other, something frightening. Unknown. Like the frightening, unknown things in my own soul.

*If you come here,* the delver sent, *it will be difficult to return. Very difficult. And you might get lost...*

I felt Doomslug's mind trembling. The rest of the delvers began to reappear, eyes opening—piercing white holes in reality, burning and *hating*. They did *not* want me going where that delver directed.

In the end, that was what prompted my decision. *I'm sorry, Jorgen,* I sent—hoping he could at least feel the words. I had to choose the path that

led to answers. Because in that moment, I was absolutely certain it was the only way to protect the people I loved.

*You go home*, I told Doomslug. *I will find my way later*. I grabbed hold of the destination the delver had sent me.

*Thank you*, the delver projected. I could feel its sincere relief. *Seek to walk...the Path of Elders...and remember to not get lost...*

*Wait!* I sent. *The Path of Elders?*

But the delver withdrew, and I felt the others preparing to attack. So I gave Doomslug a final push to go home, then activated my powers and threw myself into the unknown.



# PART ONE



# 1

I dropped out of a wall.

Like, I emerged straight from the stone. I flopped forward in a heap of tangled clothing and limbs. M-Bot made a grunting noise as his drone body fell out beside me, but there was no sign of Doomslug.

I scrambled to my feet, orienting myself, looking around to see...a jungle? Like, a real jungle. I'd seen pictures in school of Old Earth, and this place reminded me of those. Imperious moss-covered trees. Branches like broken arms, twisted and draped with thick vines like power lines. It smelled like the algae vats, only more...dirty? Earthy?

Scud. It truly was a jungle—like where Tarzan of the Apes had lived in Gran-Gran's stories. Were there apes here? I'd always thought I'd make a good queen of the apes.

M-Bot hovered up, turning around to take it in. The wall we'd fallen out of was behind us. A flat stone freestanding in the jungle, like a monolith. It was overgrown with weeds and vines, and I recognized the carvings in it. I'd seen similar carvings on a wall in the tunnels on Detritus.

I knew from the delver's impressions that this *was* the nowhere. That *felt* right to me, for reasons I couldn't explain. Somehow I had to find answers in this place. Which seemed a whole lot more daunting to me now than it had moments ago. I...scud, I had barely escaped the Superiority with my life. Now I thought I could find answers about the delvers, one of the universe's greatest cosmic mysteries?

*Not merely about the delvers*, I thought. *About myself*. Because in those moments when I touched the nowhere, and the beings that resided in it, I felt something that terrified me. I felt *kinship*.

I took a deep breath. First order of business was an inventory. M-Bot looked fine, and I still had my stolen energy rifle. I felt a ton more safe holding it. I wore what I'd escaped in: a standard Superiority pilot's jumpsuit, a flight jacket, and a pair of combat boots. M-Bot hovered up to eye level in his drone, his grabber arms twitching.

"A jungle?" he asked me. To him, the time I'd spent communing with the delver would have passed in an instant. "Um, Spensa, why are we in a jungle?"

"Not sure," I said. I glanced around for any sign of Doomslug. She was cytonic like me—slugs were what made ships able to hyperjump—and I hoped that she'd done as I'd asked, and jumped to safety on Detritus.

To be certain, I reached out with my powers to see if I could sense her. Also, could I jump home? I stretched outward, and felt...

Nothing? I mean, I still had my powers, but I couldn't sense Detritus, or the delver maze, or Starsight. None of the places I could normally hyperjump to. It was eerie. Like...waking up at night and turning on the lights, only to find infinite blackness around you.

Yes, I was *definitely* in the nowhere.

"When we entered the black sphere, I felt the delvers," I said to M-Bot. "And...I talked to one of them. The one from before. It said to walk the Path of Elders." I rested my fingers on the wall behind us. "I think...this is a doorway, M-Bot."

"The stone wall?" M-Bot asked. "The portal we entered was a sphere."

"Yeah," I said, looking up at the sky through the trees. It was pinkish for some reason.

"Maybe we passed through the nowhere and came out on another planet?" M-Bot said.

"No, this *is* the nowhere. Somehow." I stomped my foot, testing the soft earth beneath. The air was humid, like in a bath, but the jungle felt too quiet. Weren't these places supposed to be teeming with life?

Beams of light filtered in from my right, parallel to the ground. So was it...sunset here? I'd always wanted to see one of those. The stories made them sound dramatic. Unfortunately, the trees were so thick that I couldn't make out the source of the light, merely the direction.

"We need to study this place," I said. "Set up a base camp, explore the surroundings, get our bearings."

As if he hadn't heard, M-Bot floated closer to me.

"M-Bot?"

"I...Spensa, I am *angry*!"

"Me too," I said, smacking my hand with my fist. "I can't believe that Brade betrayed me. But—"

"I'm angry at *you*," M-Bot interrupted, waving an arm. "Of course, what I feel is not *real* anger. It's just a synthetic representation of emotion created by my processors to present humans with a realistic approximation of...of... Gah!"

I set aside my own concerns and focused on how he sounded. When I'd first found M-Bot in the little drone, his speech had been sluggish and slurred—like he'd been on heavy pain meds. But he was speaking clearly now, and quickly, more like his old self.

He buzzed back and forth in front of me like he was pacing. "I don't care anymore if the emotions are fake. I don't care that my routines simulate them. I am *angry*, Spensa! You abandoned me on Starsight!"

"I had to," I said. "I had to help Detritus!"

"They ripped my ship apart!" he said, zipping the other direction. Then he froze in place, hovering. "My ship...my body... It's gone..." He drooped in the air, sagging down almost to the ground.

"Uh, M-Bot?" I said, stepping up. "I'm sorry. Really. But look, can we have this conversation later?"

I was pretty sure that jungles like this were full of dangerous beasts. At least, in Gran-Gran's stories people always got attacked in jungles. It made sense: anything could be hiding out among those shadowed trunks and deceptive ferns. I remembered how intimidated I'd felt when I'd first

stepped out of the caverns and seen the sky. There had been so many directions to look, so many open places.

This was even more unnerving. Something could come at me from *any direction*. I reached down to touch M-Bot's drone, which still hovered near the ground. "We should map the area," I said, "and see if we can find a cave or something for shelter. Does that drone of yours have any kind of sensors? Are you picking up any signs of civilization, like radio broadcasts? There are mining operations in here, I think."

When he didn't reply, I knelt beside him. "M-Bot?"

"I," he said, "am *angry*."

"Look—"

"You don't care. You never care about me! You left me!"

"I *came back*," I said. "I left you because I had to! We're soldiers. Sometimes we *have* to make difficult decisions!"

"*You're* a soldier, Spensa!" he shouted, hovering up in the air. "*I'm* a survey AI designed to search for mushrooms! Why do I keep letting you push me into doing things? I didn't want to even enter that sphere, and you pulled me in! Aaah!"

Scud. That drone had surprisingly powerful speakers. And as if in reply to his shouts, something roared in the distance. The sound echoed in the forest ominously.

"Look," I said softly to M-Bot. "I understand. I'd be a little angry in your place too. Let's—"

Before I could finish he zipped away into the jungle, sobbing softly to himself.

I cursed and tried to follow, but he could fly—while I had to deal with the underbrush. I leaped over a fallen tree trunk, but on the other side I had to wiggle through a tangle of vines and fronds. After that something caught my foot, and I ended up tumbling to the ground.

When I finally managed to right myself, I realized I had no idea what direction he'd gone. In fact...what direction had *I* come from? Was that log over there the one I'd climbed over? No...that had been before I'd pushed through the vines. So...

I groaned, settling into the hollow of some overgrown roots, gun in my lap, and sighed. Well, my quest had started in a traditional Spensa-like fashion: with everyone mad at me. I realized that I needed a moment to decompress. M-Bot wasn't the only one with a lot of powerful emotions.

I'd gone from confronting a delver to floating in space thinking I was dead, to waking up in a hospital, to escaping a hit squad sent to kill me. Now I'd had to make a snap decision about coming to this place, and I worried I was wrong.

Maybe I should have gone home and found a way to send someone *else* into the nowhere to find answers. Someone smart, like Rig. Or someone careful, like Kimmalyn. Right now I felt lost. I didn't know what had happened to Cuna, and I worried about my friends.

I was alone, isolated, lost. And to top it off, my only companion—who was *supposed* to be the emotionally stable one, by programming *design*—had just thrown a tantrum and left.

Did people in Gran-Gran's stories ever feel like this? I wished I knew what Khutulun of Mongolia or Calamity Jane of the Wild West had done when feeling overwhelmed.

I don't know how long I sat there. Long enough to notice that whatever was providing the light here didn't seem to be moving. I let myself fixate on that instead of my mounting anxiety about Jorgen and my friends.

I'd made my decision. Now that I was here, I needed to learn what I could, then find a way home. "M-Bot?" I said to the trees, my voice coming out as a croak. "If you can hear me, would you please come back? I promise to apologize—and I'll even let you have the first insult."

No reply. Only the sound of faintly rustling leaves. So I forced myself to focus on a more detailed inventory of my assets. A way to do something about my situation—no matter how small—in order to start reasserting control. Cobb had taught me that.

Scud. I'd told Cobb that Cuna's faction wanted peace. Winzik and Brade could use that to lure Cobb into talks—then double-cross him.

*No, I told myself. Inventory.*

I gave my rifle a quick once-over. I'd barely used up any of its charge during my escape, which meant I had a power source—and roughly five hundred shots, depending on whether I used standard energy rounds or amped rounds.

My jumpsuit didn't include a medic belt, unfortunately, or a pilot's survival kit. I did have the translator pin I'd been using at Starsight to understand alien languages. I fished in the pockets of the jacket, hoping maybe I'd shoved a knife or something into one of them without remembering. Instead I pulled out a handful of glowing sand.

Glowing. Sand.

Silver, like it was made of ground-up starfighter hull, and glistening. It was such an incongruous sight that I sat there staring at it as some dribbled between my fingers.

Saints. What was it? I closed my hand and returned it to my pocket, where I noticed something else. A lump at the bottom of the sand? I dug down and pulled out my father's pilot's pin. The one I'd kept hidden away since his death. Yet I *knew* it hadn't been on me when I'd jumped into the portal. I didn't even have it on Starsight. I'd left it on Detritus, in my bunk. So how was it suddenly in my pocket, surrounded by silver sand?

Weirded out by its appearance, I tucked the pin away. I didn't find anything else hiding in my pockets, but I had one other asset I could think of: my powers. I knew I couldn't hyperjump home—I couldn't even *feel* home in here. But I had other abilities; the first I had ever manifested was the power to "hear the stars." Which in practical terms meant I could communicate across long distances. Maybe I couldn't hyperjump out of here, but could I reach Gran-Gran mentally?

I settled back against the tree and decided to give it a try. I just closed my eyes and...listened, extending my mind. That sounds silly, but I'd spent hours with Gran-Gran practicing this. And today I felt something.

There was a mind near me. It was familiar, like a presence I'd once known. Who was it? Not Gran-Gran...not Jorgen...not even the delver. I tried contacting the mind, and I got...a sensation of contentment? That was odd.



Then I felt something else. A second mind nearby. They were cytonic, whoever they were, because the moment our minds brushed a voice popped into my head.

*Ho there!* it said. *Another cytonic, in the belt?*

*Yes!* I sent. *I'm lost. Can you help?*

*Careful now,* the voice said. *Dangerous things can hear you in here if you use your powers! Where are you? Describe your fragment, and I shall endeavor to locate you.*

*Fragment?* I sent. *I'm in a jungle. By...um...a tree?*

I needed to find a better landmark. As soon as I considered it though, I hesitated. What if this was an enemy? How did I know the voice could be trusted?

At that moment, I got attacked.

# 2

There were three of them. Two birdlike humanoids with wing-arms leaped around the tree from the right to tackle me, and a blue-skinned dione came in from the left—probably to go for the rifle, which I had slung over that shoulder.

It was a good plan, but man were they *sloppy*. The first avian slipped as it jumped, tripping the other one and giving me enough warning to turn and start raising my weapon. That *almost* let me shoot them—but the energy blast went wild as the dione got a hand on the gun.

They grunted, trying to brute-force wrestle the rifle away. The wrong move; even I knew that from my limited DDF training. They should have slapped the barrel, controlled the weapon with one hand, and then gone for my face with the other.

I shoved the dione away, but the two avians tackled me. Grunting, I rammed the butt of the gun into one of them, earning me a squawk of pain. I pulled hard, twisting, and started to wiggle free.

Unfortunately, just as I was about to slide out of the writhing mess of people, someone else grabbed me from behind. A feathered fourth enemy? The group had apparently been smart enough to leave someone in reserve.

I struggled against the fourth attacker, disoriented, as a fifth creature bodychecked me. I didn't get a good look at this last guy—he was furry, and roughly the size of a refrigerator. While I'm...well, *not*. I'd stretched the truth to get 152 centimeters listed on my pilot records.

Being small is an advantage in a cockpit. Not so much in a fistfight. I'd like to think I gave a good showing, but in seconds I was lying on the ground completely disarmed, with the furry one sitting on top of me and one of the avians pointing my own rifle at my head.

"So," the avian with the gun said, the translated words chirping out from my pin, "what have we here? A Superiority soldier? Well, *that's* a nice surprise. A human even! I'm not afraid of your kind, human—but keep struggling, and I'll shoot you and be done."

I groaned and stopped fighting. I reached my hands out to the sides, where they were roughly grabbed and held down. At last I was released from the buttward side of that alien and was able to get a deep breath of fresh air.

My captors pulled me to a sitting position and bound my hands behind my back. I focused on the avian with the gun. I'd heard of this species. The heklo, I thought they were called? They had long beaks, kind of like a stork, but their feathers were of radiant colors. The combat fatigues they wore had no sleeves, but the feathers on their arms didn't seem large enough to support flight. They seemed...more a vestige, like how humans had hair instead of fur.

"What do you want to do with it, Vlep?" asked the furry alien. It was vaguely gorillalike. I'd seen this species too. Burls, if I remembered their name correctly.

"That depends," Vlep—the armed one, and the obvious leader—said. "Human, why did they send you through? This portal is for exiles, yet here you are, uniformed and armed."

Right. I was wearing a Superiority jumpsuit and jacket. That, with the weapon, had led them to assume I was working with the enemy. The comment also told me something else: the wall *was* a portal, and this place was where people appeared once the Superiority exiled them. I'd seen that happen. In fact...

I looked at the burl. "Gul'zah?" I asked. I'd watched a burl get exiled into the nowhere a few days ago.

"Ha," the burl said. "We grabbed him when he came in."

“So that’s why you’re here,” Vlep said. “Hunting that specific fugitive? Curious.”

I wasn’t, of course. But I could now see that the burl who had captured me had slightly different features. I wasn’t the best at distinguishing one alien from another, but this burl was shorter, more stout, and had a wider face.

So, this group—whoever they were—had an outpost here and captured people who were sent in. Why though? Exiles wouldn’t have anything valuable on them. And who was the cytonic I’d contacted? Had I led these to me by using my powers? Or was I just jumping to conclusions?

I reached out with my senses again, seeking that mind. It *wasn’t* one of these... It was a little farther away.

*What?* the voice said as I brushed it with my mind. *I told you to be quiet.*

*I’ve been taken captive,* I said. *By a group of raiders or something, who were watching the portal where I came in.*

*Pirates,* the mind sent. *This is Cannonade territory. They’re a rough group. Hold your tongue; don’t let them know what you are. And please stay quiet cytonically. You’ll draw the delvers!*

“Not talking, I see,” Vlep said, pulling my attention back. “Hold her tight.”

The dione and another heklo grabbed me while Vlep began rummaging through my pockets. I struggled again—it felt violating to have their hands all over me—though I’d expected to be searched.

Soon Vlep pulled some of the silver dust from my pocket. “Ha! A nice haul.” He dug in it, then brought out the pin.

His eyes went wide, which seemed to be an expression of surprise for his species. The burl let out a low growl, which...might also have been surprise?

“A reality icon?” Vlep asked, then looked at me. “You must be someone important.”

My heart leaped as he closed a feathered hand around the pin, but it seemed like a bad idea to show how important that pin was to me, so I

forced myself to relax. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, thanks for the treasure,” Vlep said. He tucked the pin into a small pouch.

“Do we shoot her now?” the burl asked. “I don’t like the idea of taking a soldier as a servant. Too dangerous.”

“Could be useful in a fight,” the dione said, “if they join us. Imagine having a human on our side.”

“Broadsiders have one,” Vlep said, “and he’s useless. They don’t live up to their reputations. Trust me. But we’re not going to shoot her—the Superiority sent her in armed. So she’s valuable to them. We’ll ransom her back to the mining base.”

So there *were* mining stations in here. At least that gave me a good lead on how I might get out, once I accomplished what I needed to in here.

Right now, my best chance at escape was to get the pirates to underestimate me. So I slumped down. “I’m going to get into so much trouble for this...” I moaned.

“Ha!” Vlep said. “Well, good news! Now that we know Gul’zah is valuable, maybe we can ransom him too! *Double* the haul.” He looked at the pouch. “Triple. Or more. Stand her up. Let’s get moving. Judging from that roar earlier, there’s a grig in here somewhere. I’d rather not run into it.”

He started off through the jungle, and the others pulled me along. I made a few token complaints and struggles, then slumped as I walked, pretending to be defeated.

Secretly I studied them. These pirates clearly weren’t trained soldiers. Vlep didn’t understand muzzle control; he turned and absently swung the weapon toward the others when they spoke to him. I wasn’t surprised. The Superiority denounced what they called “aggression,” and its people were unlikely to have combat training. Winzik and his cronies liked it that way. It made people easier to control.

So maybe this group had formed from exiles? A couple had weapons at their hips—a knife on the burl, and what appeared to be a pistol at Vlep’s side. But they hadn’t used those on me. They’d purposely taken me alive.

Though perhaps they'd been surprised by how well I fought, and how well I'd been armed.

I could probably exploit their ignorance. At least, someone more capable could have exploited it. I didn't have the training for this kind of thing, I...

I couldn't really use that argument anymore, could I?

I hadn't been training as a spy, but I'd infiltrated the Superiority. And arguably I'd done a pretty good job. At least until everything had gone wrong at the end.

I'd *chosen* to come here. It was time to stop complaining about my situation.

"Hey, Vlep," I said, trying to hurry up and catch him at the front of the group. I stumbled almost immediately, nearly tripping on hidden vines. Running away wasn't really an option, not while my hands were tied.

I righted myself with some help from the dione, then called again. "Vlep. You all, you're exiles, aren't you? Making the best of a bad situation? I can help you. I'm not your enemy."

"In here," the heklo said, "everyone's our enemy."

"I'm a soldier," I said. "I can train your people. Help you. I just need a little information. About this place, and about—"

He stopped and turned his gun on me. "No talking unless you're asked a question. You're in Cannonade territory now. Keep your head down and hope I don't decide you're too much trouble to be worth keeping alive."

"You know, Vlep," one of the other heklo said, "I think I might know her. Is that...Winzik's pet human?"

"Winzik?" Vlep snapped. "Who is that?"

"Sorry," the heklo said. "I forget how little about the outside gets in here. One of the high officials of the Superiority keeps a human bodyguard. I think that's her."

"Curious," Vlep said, narrowing his eyes at me. "Why would they send you to chase an exile, human? Or did you finally cross the Superiority and earn your inevitable reward?"

They'd mistaken me for Brade? Guess I wasn't the only one who had trouble distinguishing one alien from another.

As soon as I thought of Brade, I winced. I'd failed so badly in trying to recruit her. She was cytonic, and was the one who had summoned the delver that had gone on to attack Starsight. If I'd been able to get through to her somehow, all of this would—

A terrible monstrous call tore through the jungle. It was so deep and sonorous, it made the trees vibrate. The entire group froze in place and peered outward through the trees and vines. What in the unholy universe could make such a sound?

"It's getting closer," Vlep whispered. "Quickly. Back to the ships."

Wait.

*Ships?*

Dared I hope they had starfighters in here? I sure would feel more confident in the cockpit of a ship. When they started walking again, I hurried along with them. And gloriously, like debris parting to reveal heaven itself, the trees fell away and we entered a small clearing—with three ships in it. Two midsize civilian craft and a sleek, dangerous-looking starfighter.

It was like fate had seen me struggling and decided to send me a little gift—in the form of an interceptor-class ship with twin destructors. I was so captivated by its beauty that I missed something important. The group had halted around me, and they weren't looking at the ships—but at the two pirates who had presumably been left to guard them.

One was a dione, who seemed panicked and was trying to administer some kind of medical kit to the other—a burl, who was sitting on the ground by one of the ships. Female, I assumed from her size.

And her face was melting.

# 3

The strange visage made me gape in shock. Though her body was gorilla-shaped, and she was wearing utilitarian clothing like the others, she had no nose, just a small lump where one had been, and a thin slit for a mouth. Her cheeks sagged to the sides, and her eyes—a milky white—were open and staring forward.

There was something distinctly unnatural about that face. What had happened to her?

“Tie down the prisoner for now,” Vlep told the dione—who yanked me over to the side of the clearing. There they anxiously tied my hands—still bound behind me—to part of a tree to hold me in place. A root perhaps? Then the dione ran over to join the others gathering around the burl.

I immediately started trying to worm free. Unfortunately, their knot-tying skills were superior to their combat abilities. I was secured tightly, so I resorted to rubbing my binding against the bark in hopes of making it fray.

“What happened?” Vlep demanded of the dione guard. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing! I just wandered out into the trees to relieve myself, then came back to...” The confused dione gestured at the figure.

Scud. That melty-faced alien was getting unnerving. The others argued for a moment, then one suggested they try the “reality ashes,” which turned out to be the silvery dust from my pocket. Vlep began sprinkling it on top of the burl.



As I watched, her eyes started to glow. Beneath the skin, as if there were something inside her. A pure white light. It reminded me...

Of the eyes. Of delvers.

*Oh, Saints.*

I tried to yank free of the root, and it did have some give to it—but I wasn't quite strong enough to pull it out of the ground. So I returned to rubbing my bonds on the bark.

"A little to the left," a peppy voice said from behind. "There's a rougher part there that might help."

I paused, then twisted to look over my shoulder. To where a small drone hovered, hidden among the underbrush.

"M-Bot!" I said, then hushed, glancing at the pirates. They were only about seven meters away, but fortunately they didn't seem to have heard. "You found me!"

"Well, you weren't exactly quiet, Spensa," M-Bot said, hovering closer. "I see you found some friends. That's...nice. Look, we need to talk. A heart-to-heart. Heart-to-processing-unit-simulating-a-biological-function-like-a-heart."

"Now's not a great time!"

M-Bot shook a grabber arm at me. "The emotions of biological beings often come at inconvenient times; I've dealt with yours on many occasions. And Spensa...I think I have *feelings* now."

"That's...not surprising. You had them before, no matter what you said."

"Spensa," M-Bot continued, "I've been thinking. And...and feeling. I really *was* angry that you left me behind to be ripped apart, gutted, and killed. But I understand *why* you did it. I shouldn't have been so angry at you. I...overreacted."

"Great," I said, struggling to get loose. "I'm sorry too, and I forgive you."

"You *do*?"

"Yes, of course," I said, twisting to the side to show him my bound wrists. "Look, can you—"

“Oh, thank you, Spensa!” he said. “Thank you, thank you. I feel so warm! Maybe my power matrix is overheating. But, but, it’s *marvelous*! I feel like I’m going to cry, though that’s physically impossible for me.”

“Could you—”

“Maybe I could have mechanical tear ducts installed on this drone. So I could be like you, and leak? You become less efficient with your secretions when you’re emotional.”

I took a deep breath. In the stories, the heroines always had trusty steeds—who could not talk—or loyal, *quiet* sidekicks. I could see why. The Lone Ranger probably wouldn’t have accomplished much if his horse had been a mushroom-obsessed blabbermouth.

Still, I was really glad to see him. I glanced toward my captors. They were holding down the sick burl, who seemed to be having a spasm. My heart went out to her, but her distress was timed perfectly. The pirates would have noticed M-Bot for sure otherwise.

“Spensa?” he said. “Oh! Are you tied up?”

“You’re only *now* noticing?” I growled. “What did you think I was doing with these ropes?”

“I thought you were trying to scratch an itch! That’s why I pointed out the rough part of the root. You biological beings are always scratching things. Skin must be awful.” He hesitated. “To be honest, I *should* have figured out you were captive. It’s actually rather obvious. I was distracted by all these emotions my processors are inexplicably simulating. Hmm... Yup. Those are ropes.”

“Help get me out of them?”

“Uh...right. I will...search for knot-untying solutions in my database...”

“Or you could untie them!” I hissed.

“I’m not sure how.”

“It’s not that hard.”

“For you, maybe. I’m not exactly used to being able to *do* things, Spensa. I’m an information-support AI. I...don’t know how to *act*. In fact,

I've needed to send my self-shutdown protocols into an infinite loop. They don't like me being able to fly myself around."

The people who had made his old ship had implanted deep controls on his personality. It said a lot that he had progressed enough to circumvent some of those.

An outburst from the pirates pulled my attention back to the sick burl. She was struggling and thrashing, and had thrown one of the heklo away with incredible strength.

"Quickly," I hissed. "Do you have *anything* that could help me escape?"

"I have a light-line," M-Bot said. "I found one in the shop on a worker drone and moved it to myself. I was planning to use it in my escape. Maybe I could drag you away?"

A light-line was a plus. Though his acclivity rings were small, and the drone was only about the size of a lunch tray, if quite a bit thicker. It wouldn't have a lot of power.

"Attach the light-line to the ropes on my hands," I said. "Maybe with your added strength we can rip this root out of the ground and I can pull myself free. Get ready. We have to do this before the pirates notice what we're doing."

"Yeah," M-Bot said. "About that..."

The pirates were running for their ships, having apparently decided to abandon the one with the melting face. The male burl didn't like this. "Give me the icon, Vlep!" the burl shouted. "We have to try! Maybe it will work!"

But Vlep wasn't listening. As the others were running for their ships, he'd turned to look at me. He'd seen M-Bot. He immediately raised the rifle toward us, apparently deciding I was too dangerous to let live.

*Get ready*, a voice said in my mind.

*Ready?* I thought, staring down that rifle. *For what?*

The ground started shaking. Trees trembled. Vlep swung the gun away from me and pointed it toward the approaching sounds.

Then a scudding *dinosaur* came rampaging into camp—with a mustachioed human man riding on its back.

# 4

**Y**es, a dinosaur. I mean, I'd never seen one before, but this thing was reptilian, walked on two legs, and had a long tail trailing behind it. Yeah, the eyes appeared to be on its shoulders, and its "neck" was long like a trunk and ended in a toothy mouth. So maybe "enormous demonic anteater" would have been a better description. But I'm going with dinosaur.

The human was almost as baffling to me. He wore a flight jacket and combat trousers, and looked to be in his fifties. He was square jawed, muscular for his age, and his mustache stuck out a good fifteen centimeters to either side. As the dinosaur stormed forward, the man slipped expertly down the animal's flank, then hit the ground and rolled.

It was just about the most incredible entrance I'd ever seen. Why hadn't *I* ever been able to ride a dinosaur into combat, then dismount with a flourish?

Oh, wait. Escaping. Right. The stranger's arrival had taken all attention off me.

"Now!" I shouted at M-Bot.

I heaved up to a squatting position, then tried to stand, pulling with all my strength to snap the root I'd been tied to. M-Bot hovered up beside me, towing the root with his light-line as I'd asked. With his added strength, the root gave and I stumbled free.

I found my balance and pushed my hands down my back and squatted, then pulled my bound wrists under my feet to get my hands in front of me. There *are* advantages to being my shape and size.

“Excellent to meet you in person, my cytonic friend!” the stranger said, bounding up to me and yanking out a hunting knife. I proffered my hands, and he sliced the ropes with a single cut. Then he offered his own hand in a gentlemanly sort of way. “Chet Starfinder! Interdimensional galactic explorer!” He had to shout over the sound of the monster rampaging through the camp. The ground shook with its thundering gait.

“That’s an awesome name!” I shouted at him.

“Thanks! I made it up myself! What now?”

“Fancy stealing a starfighter?” I said, pointing.

“Music to my ears, young lady!” he shouted back. “It’s been far too long since I’ve had the chance!”

Unfortunately, the sleek ship was already taking off. The pirates had scattered. Only three remained: the male burl, the glowing-eyed female burl he was trying to pull to safety, and Vlep. He was shooting at the dinosaur—which remarkably didn’t seem to be hurt by the energy blasts.

We still had a chance to grab one of the civilian ships, a shuttlecraft. I hesitated though, eyeing Vlep. The feathered alien had the pouch with my father’s pin.

For some reason, in that moment the pin felt more important. “Change of plans,” I said, running for Vlep.

Chet joined me in my charge. Vlep continued firing at the dinosaur, which was ignoring him in favor of snapping toward one of the ships as it took off. I hit Vlep from behind, right at the knees, sending him sprawling. Chet scooped up the gun while I pulled at the struggling heklo’s uniform coat, eventually yanking the pouch out of his pocket.

“Freeze!” a voice said from behind.

I spun and found the sleek ship hovering nearby, destructors pointed at me. Vlep took the chance to scramble away, leaving me without a captive. Chet dropped the gun and threw his hands up. Ship-mounted weapons would be powerful enough to vaporize us completely.

Fortunately, the pilot had forgotten the dinosaur. It seized the wing with a furious bite. I dove for the underbrush, and Chet was only a moment behind me. M-Bot belatedly swooped over to us.

I glanced at the last ship, but Vlep was climbing aboard—and the others were firing on the dinosaur. Crossing that clearing would be risking death from a stray shot.

“I believe,” Chet said, “Operation Ship-Steal will have to be canceled. My regrets.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

“Shall we?” he said, gesturing into the jungle. “I’d rather not remain in the line of sight of those vessels.”

In the clearing, the female burl had come out of her daze and slammed the male against a tree. He slumped to the ground, his eyes closed, and she turned immediately toward me—as if she could sense where I was. Her eyes looked like they’d grown over with skin, smoothing the sockets. But deep within her skull, two white dots—glowing with what I could feel distinctly was an intense hatred—shone through.

My breath caught in my chest. Then the burl pointed and screamed at me.

Scud.

I gave up any last hope of getting one of those ships. I joined Chet and dashed into the jungle, chased by the sounds of destructor fire and monster roars.

# 5

Chet ran in front of me, and he seemed to have a sixth sense for where to step—I was able to follow him fairly quickly, avoiding any pitfalls or hidden tree branches. I supposed jungle survival was part of an interdimensional space explorer’s standard repertoire.

M-Bot hovered along beside me. “Spensa!” he said. “I think I’m simulating fear! Or... No. It’s time to stop talking like that. I *feel* afraid. I *am* afraid!”

Well, that seemed like progress. The shouting faded behind us, and I was glad to put a large distance between me and that creature with the glowing eyes. Though I did feel another stab of worry for Doomslug. I assumed she’d hyperjumped home, but what if she’d only jumped somewhere nearby in here instead?

I felt terrible for not being able to do a longer search for her. But...well, hopefully if she *was* in here, she was safe. Honestly, if I had to lay bets on me, M-Bot, or the slug surviving in this jungle alone, she’d top the list.

We ran until we could no longer hear gunfire. Finally Chet nodded to me, and the two of us huddled down beside a moss-covered log. This place felt so alien. What did you do surrounded by all this *life*? Planet surfaces were supposed to be barren expanses of rock and craters. That was natural and normal. Not this greenery.

“Alas,” Chet said quietly, “the pirates finally seem to have noticed that the beast feeds on energy. You can’t hurt them with such weapons, but approach with a small power matrix as an offering and they become quite

tame! Grigs are used as pack animals, for all their fearsome appearance. She should be full from all those blasts—I bet she'll wander off and have a sleep now. Still, I think we should proceed as silently as possible, because of that thing with the shining eyes. I didn't like the look of that at all."

I nodded in agreement. "Thank you," I whispered. "For your help. I didn't get a chance to introduce myself. Spensa Nightshade."

"Excellent name!" he whispered back. "As for my help, it was a pleasure! I was already prowling Cannonade territory looking for some action, you might say. And I found it, yes I did! Helping a fellow cytonic is a hearty reward on its own. That said..." He trailed off, glancing at M-Bot. "Now I don't want to pry, but...did I hear you *speaking* to that drone?"

"Oh, right," I said. "This is M-Bot."

"Hello!" M-Bot whispered. "I'm not so scared any longer. That feels nice."

"Ah," Chet said. "You, um, brought an AI into the nowhere, did you?"

"That's...bad, I take it?"

"Yes, well, I believe that word to be an understatement, Spensa Nightshade. Do your people not know about the delvers?"

"We met one!" M-Bot exclaimed. "Well, Spensa did. I was being murdered at the time. But I heard about it on the news! Sounded scary."

"Ah yes, well then." Chet looked at me. "Your AI has gone fully sentient, I see? I thought you were newly arrived, but full sentience usually takes a few weeks."

"Technically," M-Bot said, hovering a few centimeters closer to him, "the word 'sentient' just means an ability to perceive and/or feel. Many people misuse this word. Instead, 'sapience' is the word for self-awareness—or intelligence like a human being. Which if you think about it is a human-centric definition. Those rascally humans and their linguistic biases."

"At any rate, my programming is telling me to explain that I'm not sapient, merely programmed to simulate sapience for my pilots. However, my programming was written by people who smell of cheese and have noodles for brains. So I'm ignoring them right now."

"...Noodles for brains?" I asked.



“When I copied my personality to this drone, I had to leave behind several nonessential databases for space reasons. I assume my collection of keen, brilliant insults was among them.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You never had one of those, M-Bot.”

“Really? Guess I’ll have to start one up. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate ‘noodles for brains’?”

“Miss Nightshade,” Chet said, “I...must warn you. This is incredibly dangerous. Fully sapient AI are abominations, you see. Not that I’m one to shy away from danger! But I...well, I suggest you keep an eye on the thing.”

“Noted,” I said.

“Noted,” M-Bot said. “Noodle-brain.”

We both looked at him.

“I’ll keep using it until I have a rating,” M-Bot said. “One to ten. What do you think? I need some data.”

I sighed, glancing back at Chet. “You said you’re an explorer?”

“Interdimensional galactic explorer,” he said. “I’ve only been to two dimensions so far—the ordinary universe and this place. But I figured the title was fitting regardless.”

“I could use a guide,” I said. “And maybe some help understanding cytonics.”

“Well,” he admitted, “on the second I’m not going to be terribly helpful. I didn’t know I *was* cytonic before falling in here, and I’ve had to pick up what I can on my own. I can contact people through their minds, but that’s about all I can do. I hear we’re supposed to be able to teleport. Wouldn’t that be something?”

I didn’t say anything. To be honest, I wasn’t a hundred percent certain I should trust him. Something about his arrival seemed convenient. I mean, yes, awesome dinosaur antics—*so awesome*—but still...

“I would love to be employed as your guide, however,” Chet said. “I know these fragments like I know my own boots. But tell me, before we continue. Why was that pouch so important that you gave up capturing a ship to steal it?”

I hesitated. I had a hundred more questions. Where did he come from? Were there lots of humans there? What was a fragment? I put those off for the moment, settling on something else instead.

I retrieved the pouch, then pulled out my father's pin. "What," I said, "is this?"

Chet's eyes went wide. And I felt a distinct *longing* from him. An *envy*. It was gone in a moment—he seemed to be able to cover his emotions—but it had been there, and it made me wary.

"That, young lady," he said, "is a reality icon. An important relic from your old life, imbued with your attachments to places and people you love. Those are exceptionally powerful. They create reality ashes. That silver dust? Without those, or without groups of people nearby..."

"What?" I asked, resisting the urge to tuck away the pin. I didn't like how he stared at it.

"We're at the fringes of the nowhere," he said, "in a region known as the belt. It's rather difficult to explain, but the longer you stay in here, the more likely you are to forget yourself. Your past, your memories, even your identity." He paused. "I remember almost nothing about my life before I came in here. It's a blank...nothingness.

"But I'm lucky. I've been able to trade for ashes often enough to keep myself mostly...well, myself. Many people forget everything quickly—including their own names. That's why the pirates grab newcomers, you see. Put them to work, keep them close. The more minds nearby, the more your memories and identity stay safe. Unless you have reality ashes. Then you can go anywhere without fear."

"And this thing makes them," I said.

"Yes," he said, oddly solemn. "The only other way is to get them off people or objects when they first arrive in the nowhere. And the ashes fade over time. It takes...a while. Months, maybe? Hard to keep track sometimes. So if you want to go out on your own, you need a constant supply."

Well, that explained why everyone had been so excited about my pin. I dropped the pin in the pouch and tucked it into my pocket.

Chet's eyes followed it the entire time. Then he grinned, and some of his earlier perkiness returned. "Well," he said, "a guide you want, and a guide you shall have! I fear that I've played my hand, explaining how valuable those are. But if you'd be willing to trade me some—just the ashes, not the icon—for my services, then I shall dutifully be in your employ. Shall we say, a single ash per day of service?"

Scud. I had hundreds. They might be valuable, but that deal felt like a bargain. "I'm in," I said. "I need information about this place. And I need to find...something called the Path of Elders?"

He cocked his head. "Where did you hear of that?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Ah, espionage, is it! Well, I shall keep my tongue then, Spensa Nightshade. I know of the Path of Elders. Following it leads one to some of the first entrances into the nowhere, left by the most ancient cytonics. Traversing it won't be easy, but—"

He was interrupted by the sound of branches snapping in the forest. The ground began thumping.

"I thought you said it would go to sleep," I said.

"It...should have." Chet turned his head toward the noises. "I say. It *is* coming this way, isn't it? Never fear, I can tame the beast again. It is not..."

He trailed off. A coldness emanated from the same direction. A kind of...chill that penetrated my soul. And a sound reverberated in my head. No words. Just a low hiss, accompanied by an intense wave of hatred.

"I think," he said, "perhaps we should be away. With haste."

"Agreed," I said, jumping to my feet.

Chet took the lead, faster this time, and I followed as best I could. He slid across a fallen log, then hit the ground and moved with a light, quick step, ducking through a group of fronds. M-Bot zipped after him. I slid over the log awkwardly, then stumbled through the same plants, barely staying upright.

We fortunately hit a patch of less dense jungle, letting us pick up our pace further.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “I’ll note a nine from you on the rating for that insult of mine. Great, with a little room to improve. How does that sound?”

I grunted. The noises behind us were getting closer.

“Chet said that thing eats electricity,” M-Bot said. “It...won’t eat *me*, will it, Spensa?”

I just focused on trying to keep up with Chet, who waved me forward, then hurried through the underbrush. I barely avoided tripping.

“You know,” M-Bot said, his volume turned down low, “it’s rather inconvenient that you humans need your aspiration apparatus in order to communicate. Often when you’re working hard, you also have important things to say. But you can’t say them, or risk interrupting your oxygen intake.”

“Point?” I asked, puffing as I ducked under some vines.

“Oh, no point,” M-Bot said, doing a loop-de-loop through the vines. “Merely making small talk. With a small voice. Ha! You know, I’ll bet that given some more time to evolve, your species would have fixed that problem with your lungs. I can appreciate making use of existing hardware and giving it a new function, but there *are* other areas of your body that make noise when air is pushed through them. Wouldn’t it be so much more efficient if you could communicate *that* way instead?”

It was best not to encourage him when he got like this, though I *was* happy to hear him acting more like his old self. When I’d first found him in the drone, slow of speech and feeling betrayed, I worried I’d never get him back. Then after his bout of angry emotions...well, hearing him making fun of human biology was a relief.

The sounds from behind us grew even louder. I charged forward and met up with Chet, who had paused to wait for me. He took off again as soon as I reached him.

“Something’s wrong,” he said quietly. “The grig shouldn’t be following. This is bad, Spensa Nightshade. Very bad...”

A loud snap sounded behind us. It was closer now. Too close. Terrifyingly close.

*Don’t look*, my warrior heritage whispered to me.

I looked anyway.

The thing was back there, moving with an incongruent grace. It slid its mouth-neck among the trees, whiskers along its length feeling the way for its larger body to follow. The eyes on its torso at the base of its trunk were now glowing white. Just like the eyes of the wounded alien. And the delvers.

I felt the cold sensation increase, a pressure on my mind, as if it was reaching toward me, *searching* for me. It *knew* me.

“Chet!” I shouted, turning toward him. Somehow I’d managed to avoid tripping. “It’s *right there!*”

He leaped through a line of shrubs. I followed and broke out of the jungle, then pulled up hastily as I realized I’d not only reached the end of the trees, but the end of the *land itself*.

An expanse of open air extended before me, broken by distant masses of earth and stone that were *floating* there, idly drifting. We hadn’t been in an ordinary jungle, but one that grew on a giant floating chunk of ground.

And there was no path forward that I could see.

# 6

Chet immediately took off to the right, running along the edge of our fragment of land. “This way!”

I scrambled after him but risked a glance back. I was rewarded with an encouraging sight: though there was a meter of open space between the jungle and the cliff, the monster was wider than that. So while we could run on a straightaway, it had to maneuver around trees and tangles of foliage, its trunk-mouth-nose thing wagging angrily.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said, hovering along beside me, “I am not enthused by my first experiments in self-determination. My chronometer details that since my awakening, I’ve spent a frightening amount of my time lost, pouting, or being chased by interdimensional monsters.”

I nodded but kept running, trying to save my breath.

He zipped out a little farther ahead of me. “If you were to rate my mastery of emotions on a scale of one to ten, what would you give me?”

I grunted.

“I’ll pretend that was a three,” M-Bot said. “I know it wasn’t optimal, but for a newly awakened robot, you have to admit that I did a fine job. In fact, all things considered, I think I deserve higher than a three. I feel bad that you’d rate me so low, Spensa.”

I glanced over my shoulder again. The beast had fallen behind, but I could still see those eyes glowing on either side of its trunk.

*What...* I felt the word pushed into my mind. *What have you...*

I redoubled my efforts anyway, and with a burst of speed caught up to Chet. “Where,” I managed to say. “Are. We. *Going*.”

He pointed ahead. “Another fragment up there. You see it? I’m hoping we can leap from this one to that one, and thereby escape the beast.”

Tons of these fragments hovered about, all on the same plane, at the same elevation. Like they were scattered pieces of a puzzle on an invisible table. Ahead, a tan chunk of ground was drifting near, separated from our chunk by only a few meters. Seeing it highlighted to me that there wasn’t much rock under my feet. Did sections of these masses break off? Was it dangerous to be this close to the edge?

We ran anyway. And as we drew closer, I saw that the distance between our fragment and the tan one was larger than it had looked. Clearly farther than a person could jump.

Chet ran beside me, and his expression fell as he obviously realized the same problem. “Miss Nightshade,” he said, glancing toward the monster, “I fear I might have led us both to our dooms. Would you prefer to try to hide in the forest or stand and fight?”

“Neither,” I said, feeling that beast’s *mind* pressing against mine. “M-Bot? Want to earn a ten out of ten on saving my life?”

“Ooooh,” M-Bot said. “Ten is way higher than three. I mean, depending on your frame of reference, of course.”

“Go attach your light-line to that other fragment,” I said, panting, “then come back! Meet us by that boulder up ahead, where the two fragments are closest to one another!”

He zipped off. I wasn’t certain how much mass that little drone’s acclivity rings could support, but a good light-line could bear my weight and more.

“Excellent idea!” Chet said. “Keep running! We can make it!”

Behind, the beast roared, but the voice was different now. It sounded like a hundred different versions of the same roar, overlapping. I glanced over my shoulder and saw it charging toward us, nearly upon us.

Scud. Couldn’t it see I wasn’t worth the effort? That had to be one advantage I had over someone like Conan the Barbarian. I would barely

constitute a snack. But I didn't think it was my flesh it wanted to consume.

Fortunately, M-Bot's drone moved at a good speed. He was already attaching the light-line to the other fragment. That accomplished, he streaked toward us, trailing the glowing reddish-orange line of energy.

The monster's footsteps shook the ground just behind us. I could practically feel its breath.

*Come on...*

M-Bot soared back—then pulled up short right before reaching our fragment. He jerked to a halt in the air. The light-line wasn't long enough.

He was so close though...

I glanced at Chet. He nodded.

Only one thing to do.

We reached the part of the fragment nearest M-Bot and—together—we jumped.

We probably made a dramatic sight, the two of us hanging in the air as the monster arrived and snapped at the place where we'd been standing. We soared over an infinite expanse and...

I managed to grab M-Bot's drone.

Chet missed. He'd aimed too low and ended up slamming into my waist. We all started to plummet, as M-Bot's acclivity rings proved far too weak to keep us in the air. I was almost jolted free as Chet got a grip on my leg, and we swung like a pendulum away from the jungle.

I hung on for dear life, my eyes squeezed shut, concentrating on keeping my grip on M-Bot's drone. We swung back and forth a few times before slowly coming to a rest.

I opened my eyes. M-Bot's light-line was attached to the fragment some fifteen meters above us. I held to the drone with everything I had, and Chet clung to my left leg.

"Well," M-Bot said, "you don't need to rate this rescue on a scale. I figure it's pretty much pass/fail, right?"

I grunted, hugging the drone tighter to my chest. I was really glad I was in a jumpsuit, because otherwise there was a good chance Chet would have ended up falling for eternity, his only company a pair of women's trousers.



M-Bot began to retract the light-line. Fortunately, the mechanism proved strong enough to hold us as we inched upward. I glanced behind me, where the monstrous creature stood at the edge of the jungle, watching. Those haunting eyes glowed so brightly they consumed its other features.

Vast, terrible, they intruded on my mind. *What...have you done...to the Us? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*

That was the delvers. I recognized their minds.

“Can you hear that?” Chet asked softly.

“Yeah,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut again. I forcibly *pushed* the delvers away.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the beast retreating into the jungle, vanishing in the shadows.

“I sure am glad everything turned out all right,” M-Bot said as we slowly moved upward. “Actually, that’s me lying. Look at how good I’ve gotten at that! In truth, Spensa, I’m *still* frightened. Even though we’re safe now. Why is that? Shouldn’t I be relieved?”

I shook my head. “It sometimes takes a few minutes for nerves to settle. Chet, how you doing down there?”

“Contemplating my life’s choices, Miss Nightshade,” his voice said from below. “How is your grip, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Solid, for now,” I said.

“If you start to slip, I’d request that you inform me. As your would-be rescuer, I will not allow my weight to hasten your demise! Better that one should fall than two.”

“Don’t talk like that!” I said. “What would happen? Would you fall forever?”

“At least until you cleverly acquired a ship and came to my rescue!” he said. “I’d hope my performance up to this point would earn such a turnabout. But let us simply hang on!”

Fortunately, I’d positioned myself to grip not just with my fingers but my whole arms. I was fairly stable, all things considered.

We eventually pulled to a halt near the rim of the fragment, where M-Bot had stuck his light-line. There were a few centimeters of slack left, but

he couldn't retract that while I was clinging to his boxy form.

"You'll have to climb up first," I said to Chet.

"Right, then!" Chet said. "Sorry in advance!"

He started pulling himself up by my jumpsuit. I focused on keeping my grip. My hands were slippery from my sweat, and Chet's weight as he climbed threatened to jostle me free. Eventually however, he was able to grab something on top of the fragment and haul himself up over the side. I sighed in relief.

His hand reached down a moment later, and I accepted the help, letting him heave me up onto the surface of the new fragment. Bits of dirt and sand rained off the side, sprinkling against M-Bot's hull as he hovered up. We were on some kind of desert fragment—it was covered in sand, broken only by occasional bits of scrub plant life.

Nothing here appeared immediately threatening. Chet and I looked at each other, then both of us deliberately scooted away from the edge before collapsing and letting out exhausted sighs. My arms ached and my heart was still pounding. But when I glanced at Chet, I discovered he was *grinning*.

And...scud. I felt the same way. There was something incredibly thrilling about our wild escape. My friends called me crazy for this sort of reaction, but Chet seemed to get it.

"We had *no* business surviving that," I said to him.

"None whatsoever!" he agreed. "But it *is* the most fun I've had in ages."

M-Bot's drone turned from me to Chet, then back to me. "You're insane!" he said to us. "Both of you!"

"We simply appreciate life, abomination!" Chet said, dusting his clothes off and standing up. "Nothing brings you more of said appreciation than nearly losing that which you value." He walked back to the edge of the fragment and put one foot up on a rock, leaning forward as he studied the jungle fragment. It was drifting away from us at a slow speed.

Standing like that in his flight jacket, I had to admit he cut an impressive figure. He reminded me of...well, someone from one of the

stories. The people I'd dreamed about meeting, even imagined myself joining in an adventure.

But I couldn't help being wary. Running into him here so quickly seemed coincidental. But what did I know? Maybe this strange place was full of heroic adventurers. You couldn't ask for a better ambiance. Because as Chet stood there staring outward, the jungle fragment drifted far enough to the side for me to finally make out the source of light in this place.

A gigantic, expansive bright sphere of light rose halfway over the horizon. It looked like a bomb frozen mid-explosion. Though it was difficult to tell from my vantage, it felt like hundreds—maybe thousands—of fragments led toward it, each with a different terrain.

A thousand little worlds of adventure, leading like a broken roadway toward that enormous sphere. Was that a sun? It looked far too big, and was too close. I mean, yes, it was probably hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away—but suns were supposed to be millions upon millions of kilometers away.

Plus, it didn't seem to be producing any heat, and I could look directly at it without trouble.

"We call it the lightburst," Chet said, turning back to me. "It's where the delvers live. The center of everything, in here. I assume from your expression that you'd like some answers?"

"That sure would be a nice change..."

"And you still intend to follow the Path of Elders?" he asked.

"That's why I'm here."

"Then our journey begins," he said, walking over and offering a hand to pull me to my feet. "Join me, Spensa Nightshade, as we head toward adventure and I do some explaining."

# 7

“All right,” I said as we started across the desert. “First question. *How* can this place be the nowhere? I’ve been in the nowhere before during hyperjumps. I think I’d remember flying chunks of stone and monsters with teeth in their noses.”

“An astute observation. What you experienced before is the *inside* of the lightburst.” Chet spun around, both arms extended as he walked. “We are outside it now—in the belt, which is a boundary area. Things of our world—like time, individuality, matter itself—have leaked into the belt. Like how you get brackish water between an ocean and a river.”

“I’ve...never seen an ocean,” I said.

“Tragic!” he said. “Perhaps imagine two countries next to one another. Over time, the people living near the border might pick up the other country’s language. Start to practice some of its habits, customs, traditions. Well, that’s the belt: the part of the nowhere that abuts the somewhere—the ordinary universe—so has some of the same rules. Those who tossed you in here didn’t warn you?”

“I wasn’t thrown in,” I said. “I jumped in on purpose. To escape being captured.”

“Some might call that extreme,” Chet said.

“It was my warrior’s duty,” I explained, “to avoid capture, so that I could not be tortured into betraying my friends.”

Chet grinned. “I like the way you think, young woman. Honor, valor. From those I’ve met in here over recent years, I worried such ideals had

been lost!”

“There is this galactic empire,” I told him, “called the Superiority. They...have a different perspective on battle.”

“I know the Superiority,” Chet said. “They have a large base in here for extracting acclivity stone.”

“And so they must get the stone out,” I said.

“Yes, but the only active portals for that are operated by the Superiority,” Chet explained. “From what I know of them, they are unlikely to allow access. They seem a rather controlling bunch, led by...some unsavory individuals.”

“They’re absolute jerks,” I agreed. The word made me sentimental and think of Jorgen. It was a stupid reaction, but it felt like years since I’d last heard his earnest voice.

I’d almost been able to go back to that. Instead I’d come here—a decision I desperately hoped was the correct one.

*Please, Jorgen, I thought, stay safe. And be smarter than I’ve been.*

Chet snapped a branch off a nearby dried-out shrub, and we stopped walking for a moment as he drew a wide circle in the sand, with a smaller circle at the center.

“Imagine this as the nowhere,” he said. “The lightburst is this circle at the center. All of this larger portion is the belt—where the fragments float. I’ve always thought it resembled a sunny-side-up egg, the yolk being the lightburst and the white being all the fragments.”

“Got it,” I said. “Where are we?”

“Right at the edge,” he said, stabbing the stick at the very rim of the drawing. “This is pirate territory. Specifically, we’re in the region claimed by the Cannonade Faction, near the border of Broadsider Faction territory. That’s where we can start the Path of Elders.”

“Which is...”

“When people come into the nowhere, they leave an impression,” he explained. “Memories, embedded into the stone of the portals. You can view these—and a long time ago, some cytonics organized a few of the portals into a kind of narrative. One walks the Path of Elders to see

firsthand the lore of the ancient cytonics.” He hesitated. “I’ve never done it, but it supposedly requires you to travel all the way inward to the lightburst.”

I turned toward the enormous glowing sphere. “That...seems like quite a distance.”

“It’s a trip of roughly fifty thousand klicks.”

That was a daunting distance. Even in a Poco starfighter at full speed, it was a trip that would take many hours. On foot... Well, scud. We were talking years.

“So,” I said, “we really are going to have to find a way to steal a ship.”

“I’m looking forward to it!” Chet said.

“I’ll try not to distract us by going the other direction this time.”

“You made the correct choice,” he said. “Reality icons are worth more than ships. Unfortunately, I fear that even with a ship our journey will be difficult.” He drew a little more on his map of the nowhere. “I know where the Path of Elders starts—here in the rim, inside Broadsider territory. I can get us there. But to get any farther inward, we’re going to have to move through Superiority territory, which will be *very* difficult. They have long-range scanners and dozens of starfighters. If we try to fly through, they’re likely to intercept us.”

“I’m pretty handy with a starfighter,” I said.

“Well, I’m excited to see you fly, then!” he said. “The Superiority forces aren’t the best pilots. In fact, everyone in here tends to be people the Superiority *forced* in. Not all are exiles, but the workers are pressured into their jobs at the acclivity stone quarries at their base, Surehold.

“Most of the pirates are miners who have defected. The entire place is a mess, Spensa Nightshade. Full of desperate people trying to survive. To move inward along the Path, we’re going to have to sneak past them all. And then... Well, if we have to approach the lightburst, it’s going to get even worse.”

He pointed at the remainder of the space, past Superiority territory, inward toward the lightburst. “This is No Man’s Land. The fragments are

more stable through this section, with less bumping or colliding. But this is delver territory.”

“Isn’t all of the nowhere delver territory?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” he said. “Out here in the belt, things are too much like the somewhere for them. They can’t see into this region well, and you can hide from them here. But if you get into No Man’s Land...well, it will be impossible to avoid their attention. I’ve heard of pilots in No Man’s Land seeing things that aren’t real. Or crumbling to dust.”

I thought it through, surveying the crude drawing. M-Bot hovered over, inspected it, and took a picture.

“What’s to the far right?” I said, pointing. “And the far left? Can you go all the way around?”

“Possibly,” Chet said, “but in those directions there are large expanses with no fragments. Empty sections are dangerous to cross, even with a ship. But the Path of Elders is forward, not to the sides. Still determined to walk it?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“That’s the spirit!” he said, standing.

“Once we do all this, there will still be one problem,” I said. “I’ll need to get home. If the Superiority doesn’t let me use their portals, then what?”

“Well...” Chet said. “Theoretically there’s a way out. A quite simple one.” He turned and looked toward the lightburst.

Right. That was the center of the nowhere—the place where I traveled when I hyperjumped. “If I get into the lightburst, I can jump home?”

“I believe so,” he said. “I’ve never dared get close enough. But it should work—it’s like a giant portal between dimensions, after all. I’ll admit, though, the lightburst intimidates me. Inside, there is no time. There is no place. It’s like...a single point somehow as vast as a universe.”

Scud, that broke my brain to think about. I took a deep breath. “Let’s get on the Path first.”

“Onward we go, then!” He pointed with his stick, like some general with a sword. “We’ll need to cross eight fragments to get to where the Path starts. But in relative terms, that’s right round the corner!”

We continued across the sand, and M-Bot went hovering off to investigate some of the local plants. Just walking was harder to do than I'd imagined. It took extra effort to move when the ground kept shifting beneath you. Yet I was excited. This was all so new, so *interesting*.

I fished in my pocket and brought out my father's pin. I felt...serenity, having it in my hand. How odd.

Chet eyed it as he had before. Hungry. As if he physically *couldn't* tear his eyes away from it. I trusted him well enough, but...well, that hunger made me tuck the icon away. Instead I brought out one of the reality ashes and handed it to him. It was merely a speck, but he took it reverently and tucked it into a pouch from his pocket. Then he held that pouch, breathing in and out, and visibly relaxed.

"You said people lose themselves in here without those," I said. "Is that what was happening to that burl? The pirate whose face was...melting?"

Chet shook his head. "I don't know *what* that was. It felt like something far worse. Like..."

"A delver was possessing her."

"Indeed. I normally enjoy new and exciting events, yet I would not wish to repeat that one! But thank you for the ash. It is...comforting to hold."

There was a haunting tone to his voice. "Do...you remember *anything* of who you were?" I asked. "Before?"

"No," he whispered. "I have forgotten myself entirely. I remember some few things about the last few days before I entered—some caverns, and old ruins—but that time is so vague to me. Even my early days in here are fuzzy. That's not surprising, I confess. I've been here a long time—almost two centuries, I think!"

"Wait, two *hundred* years?" I asked.

"Well, around a hundred and seventy," he replied. "Best I can count. Time is hard to track in here, but I wrote down the date—and have been able to confirm it a few times in order to help me keep track. Yet I haven't aged a single day.

"I haven't always been able to get ashes, so during those times I took work for one group or another, since people staying together can replicate



the effect of ashes.”

I found it daunting to think about what had happened to Chet. If I stayed too long, would I forget Gran-Gran? My father? My friends? Scud, I needed some time to process that.

Unfortunately, M-Bot chose that moment to come hovering up, jabbering excitedly. “Did you see those things over there, Spensa? Those are cacti! They’re *so beautiful*. Is it normal to see something like that, and feel so overwhelmed? I...I want to write *poetry* about how pretty they are.”

“Uh...” I said.

“Cacti are so neat, they make me want to dance. Is that a good poem? Will you rate it on a scale of one to ten?”

“Poems don’t deserve numbers, M-Bot. But if you like it, then it’s wonderful.”

“Great! Let’s see what my rhythm and rhyme analysis protocols say... Oh, Spensa. That’s a *terrible* poem. You should be ashamed for liking it. You know, ‘cacti’ is such a funny word. I think ‘cactuses’ would have been less funny, don’t you? And easier to rhyme?”

I just wanted a break right now—though I loved the robot, he could be a bit much. “Hey, I think I saw a mushroom,” I said, pointing.

“What, *really*?” he said. “Where!”

“Between those two bushes over there, in the distance.”

He zoomed off. I found myself thinking about what Chet had said about his age. Two *hundred* years?

“So...are we immortal in here?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “And I think my not-aging might be due to my powers. Other people do age, and unfortunately, ordinary wounds can still kill us. But our biological functions are odd. You won’t need food in here, for instance—and after a few days you won’t even need water. We do need to sleep, but it doesn’t seem to be required as often.

“Night never falls. The lightburst doesn’t move. And the longer you stay, the more the passage of time will all blend together. Days. Weeks. Years. Centuries...” He shook his head.

“I’ll admit,” I said, “I’m starting to feel a little tired. It’s been...kind of a long day for me.”

“Well, then!” he said. “There is some shelter farther along this fragment! I suggest we take a break there.”

We’d walked for another few minutes when M-Bot came zipping back up. “You didn’t see a mushroom, did you?” he demanded.

“No,” I said. “Just wanted to distract you.”

“Why would you do that?”

I shrugged, not wanting to explain. “It’s a joke humans sometimes play. You trick someone by sending them on a meaningless chase.”

“What a terrible joke. Scanning culture databases. Oh. It’s called ‘made you look.’ What an original name. Your kind has a terrible sense of humor, something I can authentically say now, as I am truly alive. But your prank is not important. It occurred to me that cacti are *desert mushrooms*. They look kind of the same. And act kind of the same. Except for the whole ‘living in an arid location’ part, which would kill most mushrooms...”

Great. After walking a little farther we crested a small dune, and Chet pointed ahead. “See those hills?” he asked.

I picked out some rocky chunks rising from the desert.

“That will be our housing for the ‘night,’” Chet explained. “I’ll jog on ahead to secure it and be certain the cave there is safe. Join me at your own speed! You’re looking a little run-down, but certainly with good reason!”

I nodded, grateful as he jogged off. Once, I might have been angry at the implication I was too weak—but he had a lot of experience in this place, and I had practically none. I was woman enough to admit that pushing myself now was a bad idea.

So I followed at a slower pace, M-Bot at my side. “M-Bot,” I said, something occurring to me, “you got a historical database from Superiority records, right?”

“Sure did!” he said. “I had to dump a lot of it, but I kept many text files, which are small. I now know when jazz music developed. You know, in case it’s important—”

“Chet said he’s around two hundred years old,” I said. “Would he have been alive during the Second Human War?”

“Most certainly, if his guess of his age is accurate,” M-Bot said. “The Second Human War began two hundred and fifty years ago, but lasted decades. It was characterized by the first attempts to weaponize the delvers, who had appeared near the end of the First Human War.

“The first war started when humans escaped Earth and found an entire galaxy full of people who enforced nonaggression by imprisoning, exiling, or executing those who showed aggressive tendencies. Let’s just say they were *not* ready for your people. Boy, howdy.”

“... ‘Boy, howdy’?”

“Cool, huh? I just made that up.” He buzzed around me. “No, I didn’t! That was a lie! Ha! I can say them *so easily* now. Anyway, if Chet there was born two hundred years ago, he’d have lived during the time known as ‘the stilling,’ when the galaxy was actively trying to stop using wireless communication. These were the times punctuated by the worst and most terrible delver attacks, and when the war was starting to end.”

“When was the original colony on Detritus destroyed?” I asked.

“That’s uncertain,” M-Bot said, “as Detritus was a secret project, and the Superiority didn’t have records of it. We can guess it was between three hundred and two hundred years ago.”

“So Chet wouldn’t have been alive when it was made?”

“A reasonable assumption,” M-Bot said.

We reached the hills. Chet had disappeared into a cave there, but I could see his footsteps leading in.

“For further reference,” M-Bot said, buzzing up beside me, “I crashed on Detritus a hundred and seventy-two years ago.”

“Huh,” I said. “Chet said he came in here right around a hundred and seventy years ago. He mentioned remembering some caves in the place he was before he came in here. And ruins...”

I trailed off. We looked at each other. Or, well, I looked at the box that contained M-Bot’s circuits, and he focused his lenses on me.

Then we both took off toward the cave.

# 8

The cavern was small, barely as large as one of the bunk rooms on Detritus. A soft tinkling sound accompanied some water dribbling in through the wall and gathering in a shallow pool at the rear.

Chet knelt there, washing his hands. He looked up as I skidded to a stop, kicking up sand, my fatigue momentarily forgotten. “Chet,” I said. “You said you remembered some things about the day before you entered.”

“Just bits and pieces.”

“Did you know someone named Commander Spears?” I demanded, naming the man who had been M-Bot’s pilot all those years ago, when he’d crashed on Detritus.

Chet frowned. He shook his hands off, then stood up and ran them through his silvering hair. Slowly, he reached to the chest pocket of his flight jacket and took something out. A patch, as if from a uniform.

It said SPEARS on it.

“Oh, *scud*,” I said.

“I...think I crashed somewhere?” he said. “A place with caverns, and... metal platforms in the sky? It’s so fuzzy, though I have a distinct impression of a wall full of strange lines. I now recognize that as a nowhere portal. I must have fallen through.”

Scud. Scud, scud, scud.

M-Bot hovered at my side, and I could sense his concern. Like, *actually* sense it. I could *feel* his emotions. He was worried. Apprehensive. Shocked.

“I found your ship,” I said. “It had an AI on it. You are M-Bot’s old pilot.”

“I...hardly think I could fit in a drone...” Chet said.

“He used to be in a ship,” I explained. “An extremely advanced one. All he could remember about his pilot was the name, and some orders. That was *you*, Chet.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “Why, I find it difficult to say this without giving offense, but I would *never* have fraternized with an AI. They draw the attention of the delvers!”

“You have the patch,” I said, pointing. “You remember Detritus, my homeworld. You *are* Commander Spears.”

Yet another part of me rebelled against the idea. *This seems impossible*, I thought. What were the chances that we’d enter the nowhere and find M-Bot’s original pilot within *minutes*? Something very suspicious was going on.

“We were friends, Chet,” M-Bot said, flying closer. “I mean...I don’t *remember* that, but I felt it. We must have been. I...I tried to follow your final orders, all those years. Kept trying until I ran out of power and shut down... Waiting...”

Chet sighed. “I don’t know much, but I’ve heard that computers have severely limited processing speeds unless you let their circuitry dip into the nowhere for calculations. It’s a trade-off. Either deal with a nearly useless computer, or...” He nodded toward M-Bot.

“They come to life?” I guessed.

“Everyone talks about it in here,” Chet said. “The pirates who used to be Superiority? They whisper about it. You can’t let a true AI continue to function. They’ll eventually draw the delvers to you. To keep an abomination like that is...well, it’s certain death. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why would AIs bring the delvers?”

“I can’t remember,” he admitted.

I didn’t know what to make of that. Or any of this. It *did* seem that Chet was Spears though. We’d wondered what had happened to him after crashing on Detritus and leaving M-Bot’s ship in that cave.

It stood to reason that Detritus would have had a way into the nowhere, as we'd found abundant acclivity stone on the planet. The people who had built Detritus must have had mining operations, like the Superiority now had. Maybe they'd traveled here using that spot in the caverns that had carvings like the ones on the portals.

"I've tried to get back," Chet said, wistful. "Find the place where I entered, then go through? Seemed like quite an adventure! But I've forgotten the way to that portal—and every one I've found since has been locked. The people who made those portals, whoever they were, grew *exceedingly* frightened of what was in here."

He turned away from me and M-Bot. "Anyway, we should bed down! Camp for the night, such as it is. Tomorrow is a big day! With a solid hike, we can make it to the first portal in the Path of Elders."

He took off his jacket and began rolling it up, evidently to use it as a pillow.

It was *too* convenient. *Too* improbable. Perhaps...perhaps I'd been drawn to this location, when hyperjumping into the nowhere? Because of him? Could that explain the coincidence?

Unfortunately, I was starting to feel genuinely exhausted. I wasn't in much of a state to process this information. I pulled off my own jacket to use as a pillow, then hesitated as I noticed M-Bot was gone.

I cursed myself softly. Of *course* he'd left, after hearing what Spears had said. I forced myself to hike back out of the cave and found him focused on a small cactus.

"M-Bot—" I said.

"You know," he whispered, "I anticipated this. We even talked about it, remember? I knew they were afraid of me. Why else would my own programming forbid me from things like piloting my ship? So yes, ha ha! I was right. My pilot was afraid of me..." He trailed off. "It would have been okay for me to be wrong."

"Look," I said, stepping up to him, "it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter what the *one person* who *knows anything about where I came from* says?" M-Bot answered, his voice rising. "I think it matters,

Spensa. I really think it matters.”

For the first time I was glad he was in a drone rather than his old ship. There was a certain sense of personality and emotion to the way he moved now, the way he drooped in the air, his grabber arms dangling beneath him, limp. “It’s like finding out,” he said in an even smaller voice, “that your father hates you...”

“I don’t believe him,” I said. “About you.”

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t fought an evil wizard yet.”

M-Bot twisted in the air. Then he rose up before me and tilted his drone sideways, perhaps in imitation of a cocked head. “You know,” he said, “I was beginning to think I could follow your leaps in logic.”

“No, listen,” I said, leaning in. “In the old stories, there was almost *always* an evil wizard. Aladdin had to face an evil wizard. And Conan? He killed like a billion evil wizards. There are tons of other examples. But how long have *we* been fighting? With *no* evil wizards? We’re bound to face one eventually.” I put my arm around his drone and pointed toward the cave. “I don’t know what’s going on, but somebody or something *has* to be messing with us. We come in here and *immediately* find your old pilot? Run the numbers, M-Bot.”

“Run what numbers?” he asked.

“You know. The statistics and stuff. Math it. What are the chances we’d run into him?”

“I have no way of calculating that,” M-Bot said. “You assume I could devise a percentage chance for something with so many variables—most of which are unknown, likely unquantifiable?”

I didn’t push. “Look, that might be Commander Spears. It makes sense that he could have fallen into the nowhere. But his memories are spotty; maybe he’s *not* Spears, and this is some kind of setup. But even if he *is* Spears, my gut says we didn’t meet him by chance. Trust me, M-Bot. In some way, in some form, we’re facing an evil wizard. Or the modern equivalent.”

“Perhaps,” M-Bot said. “But you have to accept that there is evidence for what he’s saying. About my kind being dangerous. My creators were *obviously* afraid of me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “You’re my friend. I trust you.” I rubbed my forehead. “But right now, I’m *exceptionally* tired. Weak flesh body, remember? Let’s talk about this after I get some sleep. Okay?”

“I will process this information,” he said, “but I won’t do anything with it until I consult with you.”

“Good enough,” I said, then paused. “Watch Chet and wake me if he gets up, all right? I trust him well enough, but just...let’s be careful.”

“Agreed.”

We started back toward the cave. “Though,” I added, really starting to feel my fatigue, “if any monsters arrive to eat me, kindly ask them to do it quietly. That might let me get a few extra seconds of shut-eye.”

Inside I got a drink, then bedded down with my jacket as a pillow. I drifted off, hoping that my first “night” in the nowhere wouldn’t turn out to be too weird.

I obviously should have known better.



# INTERLUDE

I drifted.

And I searched.

Though my body was still exhausted, my mind quested outward, somehow conscious. This had never happened to me before, but it felt like a natural extension of my powers—my mind existing separate from my body, as happened when I entered the nowhere during a hyperjump.

I once again tried to hyperjump, with no luck. I wasn't completely "here," so to speak. So instead I expanded my mind, searching, listening. I felt more confident with this part of my powers. Not only had I been able to hear the stars since my childhood, I'd recently managed to contact Chet using that ability.

I pushed myself. I needed a destination. A location. A link.

*There.*

I found someone...who was searching for me?

I felt an immediate panic. Was it Brade? Some servant of the delvers? At the same time, I *knew that mind*. It wasn't Brade. It was...

I was suddenly inside the cockpit of a Defiant Defense Force starfighter, Poco model. I was awkwardly crammed in the rear storage area behind the pilot's seat. The Poco darted through outer space, destructor fire flaring nearby.

Jorgen was flying it.

I wasn't prepared for the rush of emotions that came from seeing him—longing, passion, worry. I reached to touch him, but my hand passed

through the chair. I could feel the ship shake around me, hear him curse softly as he took a sharp turn, GravCaps barely compensating.

Was I actually here? Was this real?

His face reflected in the transparent canopy of the ship, lit from the glow of his console. There were a dozen tiny cuts on his face, and I wondered what could have caused that. The last time I'd seen him had been on that first day when I'd left Detritus for Starsight. While that had been only three weeks ago, it felt like an eternity. A part of me had worried I'd never see him again.

Now here he was. Serious as ever, almost too perfect to be real. His face a mask of concentration and sudden panic as he looked up and—

“Gah!” he shouted, jerking his ship to the side. He scrambled to look behind the seat. Though he stared straight at me, he didn't seem to find anything.

He turned around and hesitantly squinted at the canopy glass. As if trying to make out...

A reflection. When I'd seen the eyes—the delvers—in the somewhere, it had usually happened in a reflection. Could he see me the same way? To test my theory, I waved.

“Spensa?” he said. “Are you... Oh, scud. Are you dead?”

Right. That was probably what this looked like. I tried to speak, but I didn't have lungs here. So I tried another way, reaching out to him with my cytonic senses.

“No, I'm not dead,” I said, hoping he'd hear. Or sense. Or whatever. “Though I probably should be, all things considered.”

He cocked his head.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

“I can...feel the meaning of your words. Where are you? What's happening?”

“I'm in the nowhere,” I said. “The dimension where we go when we hyperjump. I...kind of fell in. On purpose. In my defense, I was being chased by half an army at the time.”

He grinned, and the lines around his eyes softened. I could literally *feel* the tension melt out of him. He'd been worried about me. I mean, I'd expected he would be, but feeling it made me choke up a little. I'd spent my life being the person most others tried to avoid.

That had changed. I had a place where I belonged. With him and the rest of my friends in Skyward Flight. How I longed to return to them. How I—

A flash of red destructor fire slammed into his ship's shield, crackling. His low-shield alarm started throwing a fit on his dash.

"Jorgen!" I shouted. "Fly! You're in the middle of a firefight, idiot!"

"I'm trying! It's a *little* distracting to have your ship suddenly be haunted by the ghost of your not-dead girlfriend!" He steered the ship in a precise evasive pattern.

I melted a little. Girlfriend? Was that how he thought of me? I mean, we'd kissed. Once. But...I didn't think it had been formalized or anything. I hadn't even brought him any dead orc carcasses, which I was pretty sure was the way the stories said to show a guy you wanted to go official.

Apparently my feelings radiated, because Jorgen—still steering—continued. "Or...you know...whatever it is you are. To me. And I am, to you."

"It works," I said. "I'll get you an orc later."

"What?"

"It might look a *lot* like a rat. Fair warning."

He grinned, diving away from the destructor fire. Judging by his proximity monitor, he'd lost his tail.

I wished I could touch him. He looked up and met my eyes in the reflection, and I knew he felt the same.

"Nothing can ever be normal for us, huh?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "My life was pretty normal about a year ago. Then something remarkable happened." He smiled. "I wouldn't go back for the world. Here, let me get us a little breathing room."

He called in the flight to go on the defensive and give him time to reignite his shield. He flew his ship out of the main battle and some

members of Skyward Flight stuck nearby, offering support and distracting enemies who drew too close.

I finally shook out of my stupor of meltiness. “Jorgen, what’s the sitrep? How long has it been?”

“A few days since you came here, then vanished,” he said.

Good. I’d spent a few days unconscious in a Superiority hospital, then one day in the nowhere. So it seemed that time passed at around the same speed in both the somewhere and the belt. Good to know.

“We’ve heard from your friend Cuna,” Jorgen added.

“Oh, Saints! They *are* alive? I’d worried.”

“Yeah,” he said. “They’re safe, but trapped. We’re trying to figure out how to make the slugs work for hyperdrives.”

“Slugs?”

“You missed that part,” he said, diverting power from his boosters to the shield igniter. “We have a whole flock of them. Um, a herd? A pod? A bunch of slugs. They were in the caves.”

“What, *really*?” I asked. “How did you find them?”

“I...um...heard them,” he said. “As I’m hearing you.”

“You’re cytonic!” I said, pointing. “Your family feared it was in your bloodline! Ha! That must be why I could find you.”

“I’ve been training with Gran-Gran,” he said. “I’m...not very good at any of it.” He grew solemn. “Spensa, it’s bad. The war.”

“How bad?”

“The entire Superiority is mobilizing. I had no idea how many planets they controlled. And we’re isolated here. We’re trying to get the slugs to work, but we have so much to learn, and...” He again met my eyes in the glass. “And we need you. I need you. What can we do to get you out of there?”

I winced. Not because I didn’t appreciate the sentiment, but... Well, he had to know.

“Jorgen, I came to the nowhere by choice,” I said. “When I jumped through the portal, I realized I could come home, but I decided not to.

Because..." Scud, how did I put this? "I have something I need to do here, Jorgen."

He frowned, looking at me in the reflection.

"I can't come back yet," I explained. "Not until I've learned what this place can teach me. I'm sorry, but if I did return, I'd be just another fighter. I need to be something more."

"You think they'll use the delvers again," he said, perhaps reading my emotions.

"I know they will," I said. "Winzik won't give up because of a single setback. And Jorgen, I *need* to be able to stop him. To do that, I have to understand what I am—and more importantly, what the delvers are. Does that make sense?"

"You think you can find these answers in the nowhere?"

"Yes. Jorgen, I'm on a *quest*."

He grinned. "That might be the single most Spensa-like thing I've ever heard you say."

"You're not mad at me?"

"I'm worried for you," he said. "But if you're right...if the delvers are still in play..."

I knew, from our research into the past, that this wasn't the first time someone had sought to weaponize the delvers. Every attempt I knew of had ended in disaster, but people continued to try. Because if you could control the thing that ate planets, who would dare stand against you?

"I trust you," Jorgen said, meeting my eyes reflected in the glass. "If you think this is important, then keep going. We will resist the Superiority until you return."

His confidence in me felt wonderful; I could feel it like a warmth radiating from him.

Jorgen unbuckled himself, then turned around, his knees on the seat. He closed his eyes, and I felt his attention on me. He reached out his hand, and I *swore* I could feel it cupping my cheek. I reached out to him too, and could *almost* feel his skin.

“We’ll hold out, Spensa,” he promised. “Until you find what you need. Which you will. I’ve learned never to bet against you.” He smiled, his eyes closed. “After all, I might win the bet, but I’d still end up with a knife in my arm.”

“Quick tip,” I whispered. “Go for the thigh instead. Makes it harder for them to chase you down.” I leaned forward, wanting to be closer to him, even if we could barely feel each other. But I began to fade.

Scud, I suddenly felt *exhausted*. It had been only a few minutes, but I soon faded completely, and ended up drifting in blackness. Try as I might, I couldn’t find Jorgen again.

My mind began to fuzz. I knew I was heading toward true sleep, and started to relax...

A voice.

I pulled myself back to awareness. I *knew* that voice. “My, my,” it said.

*Winzik.*

The words pierced the darkness, reaching toward something else. Beings. Entities.

Delvers.

I could sense them now—as an infinite number of white lights. The voice I’d heard was speaking to them. “No need to be so brutal,” it continued. “So *aggressive*. I come to you with an offer! A trade. You have something I want, and I have something you want. They are not so different, are they?”

That voice...that wasn’t actually Winzik’s voice. It was *Brade’s* voice—though of course the word “voice” was an approximation. She must have been relaying Winzik’s words, like an interpreter.

I was overhearing them—listening in, spying, as I’d been trained for so long by Gran-Gran. My phantom sense to hear the stars.

*You hurt us*, the delvers said to Winzik. *You are noise. You are not a person. You are pain.*

“I am a noise that can *end* that pain,” Winzik promised through Brade. “I can round up every cytonic in the galaxy. I can make it so none of them ever bother you again. Never...corrupt you again.”

Oh, scud. They *wanted* that. I could feel it.

*Speak*, they said.

“I must be in control of my empire,” Winzik said. “Once I am, I will find and stop every cytonic. I can’t *be* in control, however, if you destroy my people when I summon you.”

*Leave us alone*, the delvers said. *Stop yelling! Stop it all! Why hasn’t it stopped?*

I sorted through the impressions, and *kind of* understood. To the delvers, all times and places were as one. But by interacting with us, they were forced to confine themselves to our way of existence.

That said, they couldn’t truly see the future. Rather, they existed in all times at once, and so couldn’t separate and distinguish future from past or present.

Yeah, it was tough to explain. Regardless, I felt their pain. That, it seemed, was universal across dimensions.

“My, my,” Winzik said. “No need to shout. *I* can make the pain stop. But if I lose this war... Well, would you like a repeat of what happened to the delver who was corrupted? The noise who did that is among the noises I fight against.”

It seemed he knew how I’d saved Starsight. I wanted to scream at the delvers, explain that I’d *helped* one of their number, not corrupted them. But suddenly I understood what they’d meant earlier, when chasing me. When they’d said “What did you do to the Us?” they’d been referring to the one I’d separated out.

*We consider this trade*, the delvers said to Winzik.

“Yes, take your time,” Winzik said. “As much as you need.”

*We have no need of time. We hate it.*

Yes, they did. But I could feel something more from them. Beyond their hatred of time and individuality, there was a hatred of something else. Something that was coming. Something they...feared? I pushed a little harder, to get more information.

They turned toward me. Scud.

I panicked and darted away, retreating toward my body. Thinking about the implications of what I'd heard would have to wait, for my mental fatigue seized control.

I found true sleep at last.

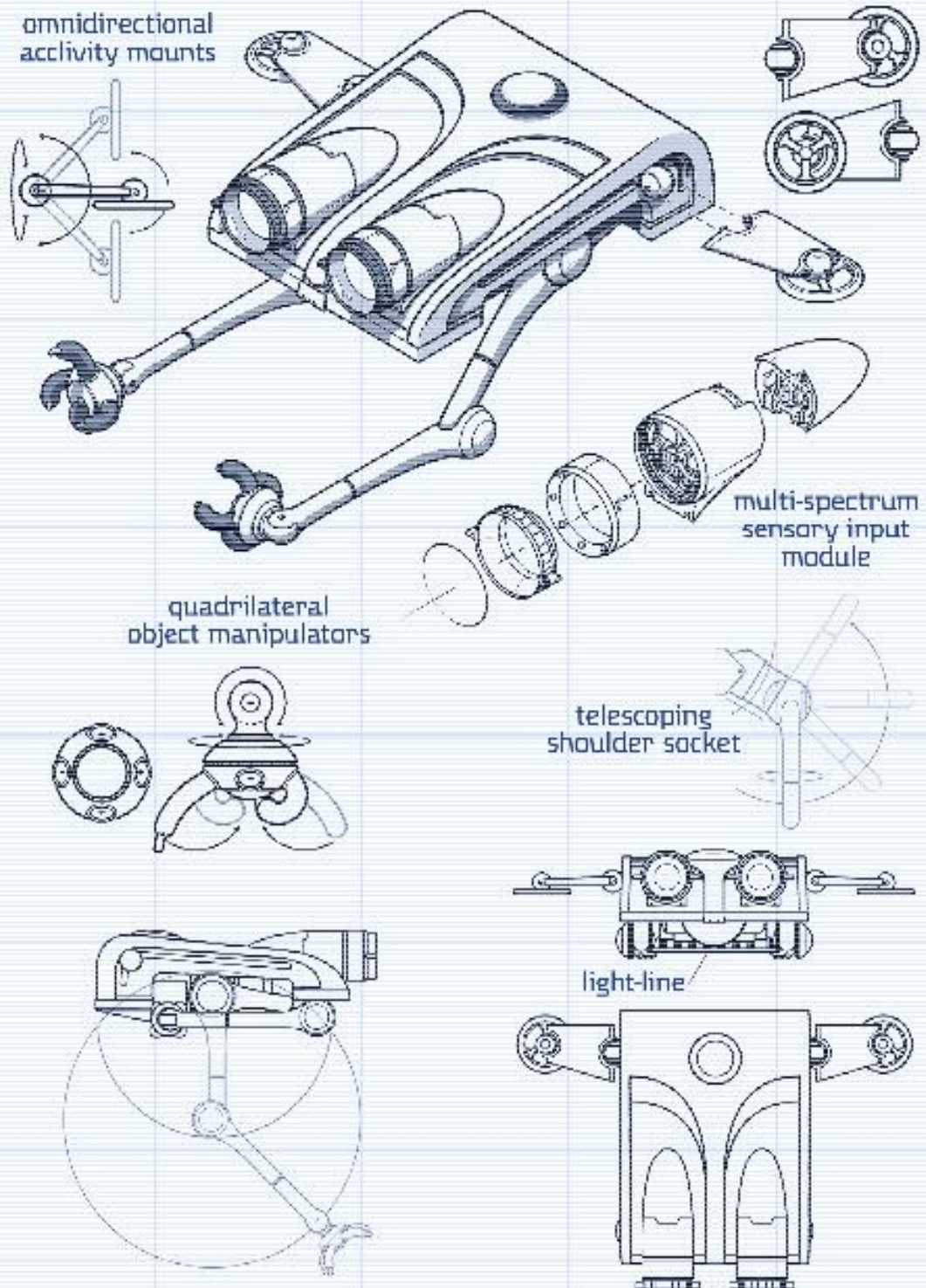


# **PART TWO**



## Autonomous Domestic Cleaning Drone (modified)

◦ ════════════ ▷ M-Bot ◁ ════════════ ◦





# 9

I woke to the feeling of something nudging me. M-Bot? Yes, he was poking me with a drone arm.

I yawned, stretching. Curiously, my strange experiences the previous night were perfectly crisp in my mind. Talking to Jorgen, *feeling* his concern. Then overhearing the conversation between Winzik and the delvers.

Scud. Winzik was trying to make a deal with the delvers.

If he succeeded, the war would take a very, *very* bad turn.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “You have been asleep for ten hours, per my internal chronometer. Chet just got up and left the cave. I woke you, as you requested.”

I sat up in the dim light, my back stiff from resting on stone.

M-Bot hovered closer. “I,” he said, “would like to be acknowledged. It was *exceptionally* boring watching you two all night.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m sorry to make you keep watch like that, but I slept more soundly knowing you were there.”

“Well, to be honest, waiting isn’t as bad for me as it is for a human. I can change how quickly time seems to pass for me by speeding up or slowing down my processor. I’m going to go take a cactus break. Let me know if you need me to do anything else super boring.”

He floated off out of the cave, and I followed. Chet stood on some of the higher rocks of the hills here, looking outward. A heroic pose, focused, determined.

I climbed up beside him and adopted a similar pose, staring across the expanse of flying chunks to the distant lightburst. Home of the delvers.

“Two hundred years,” Chet said. “And I’m finally going to do it. Walk the Path of Elders.”

“Why have you never tried?”

“At first, I didn’t know about it,” he said. “After that, I didn’t really understand what it was. Now...” He glanced at me. “I’ve never found a place I was afraid to travel, Spensa Nightshade. I always thought I’d be willing to explore everything and anything! But then I found something inside me, inside my head, that I didn’t understand.”

“I felt kind of the same way.”

“It all worried me,” he said. “Chet Starfinder, afraid to explore his own mind...” He glanced outward. “I can make a picture in my head of the *entire belt*. I can *visualize* it somehow, know my way to every fragment. That’s how it manifests for me—other than speaking mind to mind. What about you?”

“I can do the speaking thing too, obviously,” I said. “And more, I seem to be able to *intercept* thoughts that others send out, even when they don’t want me to. I can use what I hear, interpret it, use it in battle by instinct. Plus, I can hyperjump—moving instantly from place to place.”

“So it *is* possible,” Chet said. “That sounds extremely useful.”

I grimaced. “Less so when you’re as untrained as I am. Regardless, being able to *see* the landscape around you? Like you have...sonar? That sounds pretty awesome.”

“It’s useful for an explorer, I must admit!” he exclaimed, then pointed. “The fragment you need to reach is in that exact direction, but we’ll have to take a roundabout path, I’m afraid. We travel at the whims of the fragments, and can cross only when they bump against one another. I can see the route, fortunately. Eight fragments. We should be there in about a day’s time.” He looked at me and smiled widely. “Are you prepared, Spensa Nightshade, for an adventure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then onward!” Chet said, then slid down the rock slope and landed on the ground in an expert maneuver.

I followed almost as skillfully.

“Wonderful!” he said as I landed.

“I’ve got some experience caving,” I explained.

He led us off then, M-Bot zooming along behind as we struck outward. Over the next little while, I got a fairly good picture of this place—at least on the small scale. The fragments were of different sizes, but on average took around two hours to cross. And there was such *variety* to them. The first we traversed was covered in strange tall weeds with red tips. The next was dominated by towering rock formations rising high like sentinels. The third had enormous waterfalls that tumbled from heights and then flowed straight off the side of the fragment in some impossible continuous cycle.

The travel challenged me to the extent of my physical abilities. On the second fragment, we had to rappel down the sides of cliffs using the light-line. On the third we forded a river, then crawled through a tunnel behind a waterfall. The fourth fragment was a prairie with many ravines and was populated by beasts that looked like rhinoceroses, only with two heads and fearsome teeth. It was touch-and-go as we hid behind rocks while they wandered past, seeking prey. Chet explained they didn’t need to eat, but were instinctually driven to hunt.

The next fragment was rocky and barren, with only a few small trees for plant life. We had to wait on the far side to meet up with the next one—and while we stood there, Chet suddenly rushed us beneath the cover of a small scraggly tree with a thankfully thick canopy. Soon starships soared past—pirates on the lookout for slaves to capture.

Chet saw me watching them from beneath the trees, and must have noticed the hunger in my eyes.

“There is a pirate base a little beyond our first destination,” he explained. “If you are still so bold as to want to try, I believe we can acquire a starship there—through roguish means, naturally.”

I grinned at his phrasing, and then we scampered out—risking being spotted by the pirates—in order to catch the next fragment before it floated

away. We skidded down the slope and leapt across together, reaching a swampy fragment with decaying trees and soft ground.

A *real* swamp! Places like I'd imagined from childhood, listening to Gran-Gran's stories. They were all here, each landscape in microcosm, inviting me to explore. As we traveled, I began to feel an exhilaration—and something more, something deeper.

*Confidence.*

It felt like it had been forever. I'd spent weeks uncertain of myself as I infiltrated the Superiority, trying to act like another person, lying and sneaking. I'd been terrified that my personality faults would cause me to fail the mission, and thereby doom my people.

It was so *satisfying* to be able to do something that I was good at. I'd spent a decade exploring the caverns of Detritus, and had trained physically for the task. I could tell, from the way Chet spoke and acted, that he hadn't anticipated my expertise in this—and he seemed to find it thrilling to be guiding someone who could keep up with him.

It made me feel wonderful. Like I could accomplish anything. I *would* walk this Path of Elders, and I *would* learn the secrets of the delvers. I'd bring this information back to my people, and together we *would* defeat the Superiority.

I could do it. I really could.

I loved that feeling.

"Spensa?" M-Bot asked as we moved around the perimeter of the swamp fragment—the footing was more solid here. "You appear more... alive than I've seen you recently."

"I'm merely confident," I said. "That we can do this."

"I'm not," he said. "It seems like so much. Chet says we'll have to travel all the way inward to follow this Path. Pirates, the Superiority, the delvers... It's a lot, Spensa."

"Focus on what we can accomplish right now," I suggested. "For the moment, all we have to do is get across this swamp."

"Well, that's easy for me," he said. "I can fly."



“See? One step at a time. You can do this. *I* can do this. Whatever it takes.”

He nodded by wobbling his drone up and down. “Okay!” he said. “Whatever it takes. My! That feels *good*. To at least *pretend* we’re in control! I like it. Is this how you feel *all the time*?”

I wished that were true, but I didn’t contradict him as he zipped out over the swamp, looking down at...

“A mushroom!” he shouted, hovering above one growing in the bog. “A real mushroom, Spensa!”

I stopped to watch him buzz back and forth. Being in a drone suited him. There was an energy to his personality that came out as he flew around me in a circle.

Chet walked back to join me in watching M-Bot. I even caught him smiling.

“He’s really not dangerous,” I said to Chet.

“His energy *is* a little contagious,” he admitted. “We’re almost there—only two fragments to go. The portal you seek is in some ruins.”

“Ruins?” I asked. “Like from an old mining operation?”

“No,” he said. “Though we’ll pass something like that on the next fragment. The ruins we’re hunting are older. Perhaps as old as this place.”

“Have you wondered how all of this got here?” I asked him. “This landscape, these fragments?”

“Indeed I have. There are legends, naturally. People think hyperjump accidents are behind some of it, or even the delvers. But lore says that some of this was here before either delvers *or* cytonics.”

I helped M-Bot harvest a sample of his mushroom and store it inside his “specimen box,” which was the cavity in the cleaning drone where it once held the dust it vacuumed up. The little drone hummed happily as we started out again.

We reached a larger river flowing over the side of the swamp fragment. Chet directed us inward instead of trying to ford it. Though the current wasn’t swift, he didn’t like the idea of potentially being swept off amid uncertain footing.

We continued on, leaping from one firm section of ground to another. After a half hour or so of this, Chet halted me by taking my arm. He narrowed his eyes at the next section of land, then shook his head.

“False land,” he explained. “See how it ripples? Sinkhole underneath that patch. This way.” He led me through some still water, where the stench of the mud was terrible. Soon we reached another long section of dry land.

“Are there any landscapes you haven’t traveled?” I asked him, impressed by how easily he guided us.

“Oh, I’m sure there’s something out there that I haven’t seen,” he said. “But I have traveled a great deal! I don’t like staying in one place—you lose track of time in here that way. I prefer new sights, new experiences! I only stay with others when I’m out of reality ashes. Once I have a few, I’m off!”

After a little more hiking, I spotted our next fragment: the penultimate one before reaching our destination. This one turned out to be another desert, but with vast dunes as tall as buildings. I narrowed my eyes. Didn’t sand worms live in dunes like that? Or at least giant scorpions?

Before we could cross over, however, Chet perked up. He turned, then pointed. There were more starships in the sky.

# 10

Used to this by now, I joined Chet in taking cover beneath a large tree with crooked branches but a decent number of leaves. The tips drooped so low they trailed in the water, making ripples.

“Broadsider markings,” Chet whispered to me as we peeked through the canopy at the ships. “We’ve entered their territory.”

“Are the factions that different from one another?”

“Generally, no,” he said. “But the Broadsiders have a reputation for being more fair than the others. Then again, their leader is said to have once been in the Superiority security forces. I’ve kept my distance for that reason.”

There were four ships in this formation. I didn’t recognize the specific designs, but they were definitely military grade. As we watched, they clashed with another group of ships that darted up from beneath the fragment.

A quick firefight ensued, the various ships flying like hawks and prey from one of the pictures of Old Earth, twisting around one another as they soared down past the fragment.

Seeing them fight awakened something in me. I missed flying. It had been only a few days, but already I longed to feel a ship around me—its motion an extension of my body as I soared around obstacles and wove between enemies.

Being in the sky. Claiming the stars.

I missed it. Dearly.

“Soon,” I whispered as the ships vanished from sight, chasing one another beneath the fragments.

“We should probably give it a few moments,” Chet said, settling on a rock there under the tree. “In case they come back this direction.”

“That was another faction, right?” I asked. “Cannonade?”

“Your eyes are keen!” he said. “Before long you’ll know the proper markings for all six.”

“Do they often fight one another?”

“Aggressively!” Chet said. “It’s a pity. They could be out exploring and adventuring, but I suppose I shouldn’t begrudge them a little sport. We all have our own ways of passing the time in here.”

Well, if we were going to wait this out, it seemed like a good opportunity to arm myself. I’d cursed the loss of my rifle several times already, so I selected a sturdy stick from those fallen around the tree and began stripping it. Once finished, I found a good stone, properly oblong with a narrow portion in the middle.

I tried to affix it to the stick, but my first effort failed because the vines I’d picked snapped.

“If I may, Miss Nightshade,” Chet said, unlacing his left boot. He pulled out a long shoelace, revealing another one still fastening his boot. “Always double-lace your boots when exploring! You’d be surprised how often an extra bit of string comes in handy. The uses are multitudinous!”

He showed me how to lash the stone in place—and then, surprised at my lack of knowledge, took out his other extra shoelace and proceeded to give me a short lesson on different knots and hitches. I realized, with embarrassment, that I’d allowed having a light-line to make me complacent in this area.

I listened with devoted attention. It felt like such a practical thing to learn—the sort of thing that...well, that I imagined my father might have taught me. If things hadn’t gone so poorly.

Once we were done, I tucked away the shoelace—he’d told me to keep it to practice with—and picked up my club. I swung it a few times for good measure.

“A fine weapon,” Chet said, hands on hips. “What shall you name it?”

“Skullbreaker, of course,” I said.

“Excellent.”

“Though...I don’t know if sand worms have skulls,” I said. “Maybe we should sharpen a rock and make a spear, in case I get swallowed and need to kill it from the inside.”

“I doubt that will be requisite,” Chet said with a chuckle.

“Say that when you’re in a sand worm’s gullet and *I’m* standing triumphantly on the corpse of mine, contemplating how to make a hat out of its skin.”

“Ha!” Chet said. “I doubt I’ve ever met a young woman quite so... bloodthirsty.”

I shrugged. “It’s kind of an act. You know, bravado. But I do want to be able to defend myself against any beasts we encounter.”

“If we must do so, then we have failed,” Chet said. He held up a finger, adopting a straight-backed lecture pose. “No beast attacks a person unless that person has made a mistake. We trespass in *their* domain, and it is incumbent upon us to take the utmost care to avoid accidents.”

“You don’t hunt?” I asked.

“Heavens, no!” Chet said. “Not except for sustenance, which is unnecessary in here. I explore to see the wonders of the universe! Why, to leave that wilderness so desecrated... No. An explorer must *not* be a destroyer. He must be a preserver! But then, I’m rambling. We should continue. The pirates appear to have taken their squabbles elsewhere.”

We continued on, barely reaching the desert fragment and leaping across before the two drifted too far apart. M-Bot seemed reluctant to leave his mushroom hunt, but he followed us.

Chet’s comments about hunting and exploring left me intrigued—it was the opposite of what I’d expected from someone like him. The way he talked felt *liberating*. Exploring, traveling...he could do that and test his skills without needing to fight or kill. It was a new way of thinking. For me, the struggle to get better had always ultimately ended with the destruction of my enemies. Or at least the humiliation of those who had laughed at me.

I was changing though. It had begun on Starsight, as I met so many who were technically my enemies—but also just ordinary people. I wanted a way out of all of this now, more than I wanted to end the “Krell.” Was there a way we could stop this war without destroying them or them destroying us?

Chet kept us to the valleys between the dunes. I watched the sand carefully as we walked.

“Um...” M-Bot hovered out in front of me. “Spensa? I had to leave behind *some* of my information databases, but I kept the fauna surveys for all known worlds in the Superiority and...I don’t want to be a downer...”

“No sand worms?” I asked.

“Afraid not.”

“Scud,” I said. “What about giant scorpions? Orion totally killed one of those on Old Earth, so they’ve *got* to be real.”

“There are several low-gravity planets with arthropod-like creatures that would probably fit that definition. Oooh... One has a poison stinger that, if it hits you, you grow *fungus* on your *tongue*. And in your blood. Basically, it kills you. But mushroom tongues!”

“Wow,” I said. “That really exists?”

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “Are you...crying?”

“No, of course not,” I said, wiping my eye. “It’s just...I’m glad something that awesome exists, you know? Like in the stories. Maybe when this is all done, we can visit that place. You think maybe I could train one up from a baby to let me ride it?”

Chet chuckled from up ahead, leading us farther into the desert—and I allowed myself to grow excited. The next fragment would be the one with our destination, my chance—finally—to see what the delver had sent me to experience.

I should have been exhausted. And to an extent I was. It had been a difficult day of travel. It felt *good* though; there was something healthy and satisfying about being this type of worn out. It *was* odd that I wasn’t hungry. And I’d been hiking all this way and was only mildly thirsty.

But...well, I was walking across a *literal* flying desert and had passed infinite waterfalls that were fed by no tributary. I doubted lack of hunger would be the oddest thing I experienced in here. I hurried up, joining Chet as we were forced to climb a dune—a difficult process, though he showed me how to do it at an angle, and while keeping somewhat solid footing by not walking in his footsteps.

“In snow,” he explained, “step where the person in front of you did. That will save energy. Sand dunes, however, settle. And so the person in front of you will disturb that, which actually makes it *harder* if you step right where they did.”

At the top, I picked out the proper fragment. “That one?” I asked. “The green one?”

“That’s it,” Chet said.

There was so much *life* on these. Plant life, at least. Even the desert had scrub stubbornly breaking from the sand and growing defiantly. Was this what it was like on most worlds? Plants just kind of grew, without anyone to cultivate them?

“Are you nervous?” I asked Chet. “About what we’ll find?”

He thought for a moment, smoothing his mustache. “I feel...like it’s inevitable. I knew I’d make my way to the Path eventually. To the point that when you mentioned it to me, I felt like I’d been drawn to you. Pulled onto this course.”

“That...sounds kind of unnerving, honestly.”

“My apologies; that was not my intent.” He glanced toward the distant lightburst. “Still, I worry about the delvers’ hand in this place. I never can quite trust that my will is my own...”

“Do you know anything about them?”

“They’re not a group mind,” Chet said. “People get that wrong about them. The delvers are all separate beings—but they’re also identical. They live in a place where nothing ever changes, and where time doesn’t exist. They exist in one moment, in one place, indistinguishable—and terrified of anything that isn’t *exactly* as they are.”

“Okay...” I said. “A lot of that doesn’t make sense to me, Chet. But I’ll try to pretend otherwise.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “All I know is that the not-making-sense part is why individuals like you can hyperjump through the nowhere! Time and space are irrelevant, and after slipping into the nowhere you can come out anywhere else. I worry, however. Every time we puncture the barrier between the nowhere and the somewhere, we corrupt the nowhere a little. Like how you can’t walk through clean fresh snow without leaving tracks.”

“Do you think...there is snow in here somewhere?” I asked. “I’d like to see it sometime.”

“It exists, but is rare,” he said. “Tell me, Miss Nightshade. Did you actually live your *entire* life on that barren planet? How did you survive?”

I shrugged. “We have algae vats and artificial light underground. And there is *some* life. Rats live in the caverns, eating fungi and algae that transfer heat into biological energy. It isn’t much, but we make it work.”

“You sound like an exceptionally courageous group,” Chet said. “It is my honor to travel with you—though I must admit I find your home a strange place to have a society!”

“Oh!” M-Bot said, flying up beside him. “It is a *very* strange place, with a fascinating mix of technological advancements and backward ignorance. They have spaceflight, but not automatic soap dispensers, for example. So you could say their culture has had its ups and downs.”

“It indeed sounds interesting, abomination,” Chet said. “Come, Miss Nightshade and companion. We should hurry—there is a point of interest on this fragment I would like to show you before we leave it, but we will need to rush. It wouldn’t do to miss the next fragment because we dallied!”

We continued on, Chet picking up our pace. A half hour later, we crested another dune and I got a better glimpse of our target fragment. It was covered with shimmering grass—it looked so *soft*, like the fur of a good blanket—and idyllic streams that dropped off the side, sparkling like drops of sunlight. It looked like paradise as described in the stories. Green, alive—there were even *butterflies*.



However, something felt odd to me. Chet had rushed us to get here in time, but that fragment appeared to be hours away. At the rim, Chet waved me along to the right. The dunes tapered off here, and in a few moments we found what he'd wanted to show me: a pit. The sand had blown away, exposing brown rock—and a vast chunk had been dug out of the fragment, going down at least thirty meters. The sides were tiered, like a reverse pyramid, paths running along them in a spiral.

"A quarry," I said. "For acclivity stone?"

"Precisely," Chet said. "This one is ancient, but I thought you might appreciate seeing an example of a quarry. The ones the Superiority runs farther inward at Surehold are much more massive affairs, but it's the same general principle."

"Too bad they didn't leave any acclivity stone," I said, searching the quarry. M-Bot zipped past me and went soaring down to look at the bottom. "Maybe we could have fashioned some kind of floating device for ourselves."

Chet shook his head, smiling.

"What?" I said.

"They left plenty of acclivity stone, Miss Nightshade," he said, gesturing. "What is it you think we're standing upon?"

"Rock," I said.

"Rock," he said, "that floats through the sky? These fragments all have acclivity stone in them. Unfortunately, it takes refinement and energy to make it work on a scale that's usable, so I doubt we'll be able to make any kind of device. Still, it is all right here."

I blushed at the realization. Of course the fragments floated on acclivity stone. It made perfect sense, now that I thought about it. I guess the blue coloring, like the light glowing underneath M-Bot's wings, came from the refinement process.

"Now," he said, "that other fragment." He gazed across at it, then frowned. "It should be here any moment."

"By my best guess," M-Bot said, "judging by its slow movement, our fragments won't touch for ten hours."

“Ten hours? Chet, why did you hurry us?”

“I...” He scratched at his head. “Ten hours, you say?”

“Yes,” M-Bot said. “Though I have set my internal chronometer to the time used by Spensa’s people, which is patterned after one hour Earth time. The same as used by my old ship, and thus also—presumably—by you.”

Chet settled on a rock. “I apologize, Miss Nightshade. My sense of time is...not as reliable as it once was.”

I let the conversation die, but I was baffled. How could Chet have such a poor sense of time?

“Well,” Chet said. “Perhaps we should get some rest here, then attack the Path of Elders. Always best to hit a task fresh and awake! So that it can’t hit back, you see.”

I smiled. That reminded me of something Kimmalyn would say. But I agreed with getting some rest. It had been a wonderful day, though a long one.

As Chet took off his jacket to make a pillow, I checked on my reality icon, finding it had shed three motes of silvery dust today. I proffered one to him and watched carefully so I could study the hungry way he eyed my pouch. Everything about traveling with him had been a joy—everything except that look.

I tucked away the pouch quickly. Chet took a little longer to put away his ash—instead staring at it for a time, glowing and twinkling in his palm.

“So, the Path of Elders,” I said to break the odd mood. “Is there anything we need to do to prepare for it?”

“Not that I know of,” he said. “I visited this first stop one time, but decided not to go into the cavern. I feel embarrassed to admit that, after seeing your excitement.”

I stared out at the garden fragment. Yeah, it was moving more slowly than Nedd did at mess on an early morning shift. It would take a long time to get here. “It feels like the quests that happened in the old stories. That’s why I’m excited.”

“You put a lot of stock in those stories.”

“My grandmother told them to me when I was a child. They kind of just...stuck.”

“I find that admirable,” Chet said. “But I warn you not to raise your expectations too much. Life isn’t always like one of those stories.”

“I know,” I said, still staring over that beautiful field. “But...stories say something. About us, and about where we came from. They’re a reminder that we have a past, a history. And a future.”

When I was growing up, Gran-Gran’s stories had been my shield. Against the names I was called, against the things people said about my father. Against my own terror that all those things—particularly the ones about me—were true.

In the stories, there was a sense of justice. Everything had a purpose; every little bit meant something. I thought if those heroes and heroines from the stories could keep going forward into the darkness, so could I.

I might have clung to them a little too tightly. With how strange everything had been lately, perhaps I was seeking some kind of stability. Or some kind of guide...

“I can understand that,” Chet said. “It’s odd—this place has stolen from me who I was, but I still *know* things. I know what a burrito is, though I’ve never eaten one in here. I can list the names of the first human colony worlds. And I remember...stories. I partially decided on my name due to the tales of the old hero Chet Cannister.”

“Oh, those are good,” I said. “But I like the older ones best. Heroes like Odysseus.”

“Or Hercules.”

“Yeah,” I said, slamming my fist into my other hand. “Or *Satan*.”

Chet blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Satan?” I said. “The hero?”

“The...hero.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Gran-Gran told me the story. Satan got thrown into a place of fire, but he was like, ‘Hey, everyone. It doesn’t matter, so long as we have each other. We can make this place as good as any paradise.’ Then

he volunteered to infiltrate the enemy's world and went on this big quest through the Abyss."

"Now, my memory—as I've warned you—isn't great," Chet said. "But that sounds like the old poem *Paradise Lost*. I...think you might have misinterpreted it."

"What? Who do *you* think was the hero of that story?"

"Adam and Eve."

"Those losers? They didn't do anything but sit around! Everyone else had flaming swords and dramatic battles!"

Chet grinned. "Well, that's one way to interpret it. And what do I know? I only know my own name because of the patch I found on my uniform."

I made a pillow out of my jacket. As I did, M-Bot hovered over beside me. "Ummm..." he said.

"What?" I asked.

"...I think he might be correct about *Paradise Lost*."

"Read it again," I said. "You really expect me to believe that—in a story with people named *Beelzebub* and *Moloch* who live in *Pandæmonium*—the author wanted us to root for someone named *Eve*?"

Some things are obvious. Unless you're a robot, I guess.

"Do you want me to do what I did last time?" the robot asked me more softly. "Just in case?"

I nodded, then lay back, contemplating the day we'd had. I couldn't remember another day in my recent life that had been so thoroughly enjoyable. That made me feel guilty though. Jorgen and the others were fighting for their lives, and I was investigating swamps and playing explorer?

I would have to stay focused. Tomorrow we started the Path of Elders, and hopefully I'd finally have some answers. Or at the very least I'd learn the right questions.

# 11

**M**-Bot woke me the next “morning,” and I stretched, finding the garden fragment hovering an easy step from our own. My memories of the “night” contained only ordinary dreams. I wished I’d been able to find Jorgen and at least deliver a report, but I was so exhausted that my attempt didn’t get far.

Chet got up when M-Bot tapped him, and at his suggestion I searched out a nearby spring. I took a drink—one of the last ones I’d need in here—and washed my face and hands. Fortunately, I didn’t stink as much as it seemed I should have, considering all the effort of the day before.

As I washed, I glanced at M-Bot, who quietly whispered, “He didn’t get up. Slept until I woke both of you.”

I nodded, then joined Chet at the edge of the fragment. “Ready?” I asked him.

“Forward!” he said.

We stepped across. And I realized this was my first time walking on grass. It felt so *strange* underfoot. Springy, like I was walking on a pillow.

This fragment turned out to be relatively small. All green grass and hills, with a lake in the center. Near that was a hillside with a hole cut into it—like a doorway into a mine.

The tunnels beyond weren’t extensive: a little entryway followed by three small rooms with earthen walls. But walking through them, I felt an eerily familiar sensation. Scud. I’d been in places that felt like this before.

We found the portal at the rear of the largest room. It was much like the one I’d come out of in the jungle—a glistening surface of rock, slate grey,

but carved with lines. Hundreds of them this time, in an intricate pattern.

M-Bot flew up to the wall, and the lights on his drone lit up the markings. “Hmm,” he said. “I kept a database of all known scripts cataloged by the Superiority. This appears to be none of them.”

I nodded absently, tracing a curving line with my finger. “They aren’t a language, not really. I think I know what the lines mean though.”

“How can you?” M-Bot said. “You just said the markings aren’t a language!”

“They aren’t.”

“But they mean something?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, what?”

My finger reached the end of the line. “Memory.”

M-Bot hovered beside me. “Hmmm. Yes, I find this curious. I’m feeling a new emotion. It’s like anger and frustration mixed! How interesting.” With that, he hovered up, then came down directly on my head, whacking me.

“Ow!” I said, more surprised than in pain.

Chet immediately cursed, reaching to grab M-Bot, but I held up a hand to stop him. “M-Bot,” I said, “what is wrong with you?”

“That is what my emotions said I should do,” he explained. “Wow. I feel better! Curious, curious...”

“You can’t just hit people.”

“Didn’t you hit Jorgen basically all the time?”

“That was different,” I said. “First I hated him, then I liked him. So I had good reasons.”

“Ah!” M-Bot said. “You say things like that, and I want to hit you again! Would you stand still so I can smack you with a grabber arm? That sounds fun.”

“Abomination,” Chet said, “you should—”

“It’s all right, Chet,” I said. “He’s just having trouble dealing with emotions. They’re new to him.”

“I think I’m doing well, all things considered,” M-Bot said to Chet. “I bet the first time *you* had emotions, you babbled a lot and soiled your clothing.” He hovered back around to look at me. “Would you please *explain* what you meant by telling me this wasn’t a language, then immediately interpreting it?”

“These are the memories of the people who used this portal, M-Bot,” I said, kneeling and feeling at the grooves cut into the stone. “It makes a curious kind of sense. Cytonics are like...biological means of communication and travel. Hyperjumping replaces starships, and mind-to-mind contact replaces radios. So it feels right to me that there would be a way to store thoughts. A cytonic book, or recording.”

“Yes,” Chet said, kneeling beside me. “That is what I’ve heard. The Path of Elders involves a sequence of these portals—four or five total, from what I’ve been able to learn. Each is among the most ancient of ways into the nowhere, etched with the experiences of the first cytonics.”

Yes, I’d seen these patterns in the tunnels of Detritus. I’d also seen them in a large space station—the shipbuilding facility in orbit around Detritus. And I’d seen them inside the delver maze, a place I was increasingly convinced was the corpse of a long-dead delver.

“What do we do?” I asked. “How do we begin?”

“I’m not certain,” Chet said. “Admittedly, I thought we’d experience the memories as soon as we entered.” He placed his own hand on the markings. “I...can feel something.”

“So,” M-Bot said, “these things are both memories *and* portals between dimensions?”

“Yes,” I said, closing my eyes. The boundary was weaker than usual in this room. My pocket started to grow warm—my father’s pin.

Time for a test. The somewhere, home, was on the other side of this wall. Could I open the way? I engaged my cytonic senses. With my hands on the wall here...yes, I could *feel* the somewhere—my reality—pulling on me, trying to suck me through. The rock became as if liquid, and I began to sink into it.

Strangely, I could again feel a presence near me. Like I had when I'd used my powers in the jungle. The one that...that I wanted to believe might be my father. Was it guiding me? Leading me to freedom?

I stopped with a thump. Like the sound your boots made on the floor when you kicked them off at night. I tried again.

*Thump.*

"What do you feel?" Chet asked me.

"The portal is locked on the other side," I said. "As you warned."

"I hoped I was wrong about that," he said. "And that your hyperjumping powers would let you use these portals to access the somewhere. Alas! Fortunately, that is not our primary endeavor here. There has to be a way to see the memories left for us. Can you...listen to the rock? Spy on it, as you say you can do to the delvers?"

I tried that, closing my eyes and listening. Opening my mind. Yes, there *was* something here. How did I access it? I asked the rock, pled with it, to open to me. But I failed. With a sigh, I opened my eyes.

To find that the cavern had changed around me.

I could make out the vague outlines of the rooms here, but they were ethereal, insubstantial. It was as if that world had faded, and another had sprung up in its place. In this one I felt like I was floating in darkness.

I stumbled, trying to get my bearings.

"Oh!" M-Bot said. "Spensa? You seem to be experiencing motor control problems. This isn't related to the rap on the head I gave you, is it? Oh *scud*, I directly disobeyed my programming mandates by doing harm to—"

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm seeing something."

"Well, you're probably *always* seeing something. Even when your eyes are closed, technically. Or maybe not because—"

"Hush," I said, turning around. Chet still knelt beside me, looking about in confusion.

"Do you see what I do?" I asked. "We're floating in darkness. Like when in the lightburst."

"Indeed," Chet said. "Only, look here. Beside me."



I knelt, unsteady. I could feel the floor, touch it. Yet it was faint, nearly invisible to my eyes. Near our knees was a small pinprick of whiteness. It was part of the vision. "Is this the lightburst?"

Chet shook his head, seeming baffled. But as we watched, something changed. A substance began to grow around the pinprick of light, obscuring it. Growing like a tiny asteroid, then flattening out, and...

"A fragment," I said, watching as stone grew. "We're witnessing the birth of a fragment."

"Yes..." Chet said. "I believe you are correct. We are watching it grow over hundreds of years, I suspect. It's as if..."

"As if matter is seeping through," I said. "That's what this is, Chet. A tiny weakness between the dimensions. The somewhere is leaking in, forming a fragment like a stalactite forms slowly over time in a cavern."

And I knew this was happening over centuries, as Chet had said. That information appeared in my mind, because...because it had been left intentionally to inform me. These thoughts, they were the thoughts of ancient cytonics.

"Yes!" Chet said. "I believe you've done it, Miss Nightshade! This is the past. The Path of Elders. The secrets of the ancient cytonics."

Scud, it sounded awesome when he said it that way. As we watched, the fragment expanded into a block of stone perhaps twenty meters wide.

"Look," Chet said, pointing behind me. "Was that there before?"

I turned around. I didn't see any other fragments, but I did pick out a faraway white spot. It was the lightburst, but it seemed to have appeared as the fragment grew.

"It's so small," I said. "And there are no other fragments around. This must be the distant, *distant* past."

I got a sense of this place at the time. A kind of silent tranquility. Nothing dangerous. No feelings of anger. No...

No delvers. The delvers either hadn't existed at that time, or had been somewhere else.

"How can we see this?" I asked. "You said this Path was memories of people who entered the nowhere, but presumably nobody was here to see

this part.”

“Time is strange here,” Chet said, still kneeling. “I imagine that cytonics were able to uncover this somehow. Do you see this here? What do you make of it?”

A line had appeared in the ground—the illusory version. It was different from the rest of the fragment, shinier, a different color. As we watched, it grew up into a wall, just a few handbreadths high. But a tiny pattern appeared on it, a little swirl. It felt like some kind of natural occurrence. Like erosion.

Yes, that was it. A kind of interdimensional erosion. Only created when...

A figure appeared in the scene. A dione, with blue skin.

I felt the vision abruptly *slow*. Decades were no longer passing with each second; this was in real time. The dione stumbled to their feet.

“Preindustrial clothing,” Chet guessed, pointing at the furs sewn roughly together.

The dione gasped and spun around, confused. They smiled, baring their teeth. Wait, no. That wasn’t a smile. For diones that meant aggression, or maybe fear.

The dione didn’t see us, and it felt eerie to have them look through me. They then dropped to their knees and started clawing at the tiny wall that indicated the portal.

Until...time seemed to speed up again. We watched the unfortunate dione as a blur trying to find a way off the fragment. They aged, then died. Their corpse turned to dust, leaving bones. It happened in seconds.

“That poor creature,” Chet said. “Dying alone in this place.”

I knelt beside the dione’s bones. The fragment had grown larger, but only a little. “Matter leaks into here from the somewhere. You’ve said you suspected this, Chet.”

“Indeed! Perhaps the belt formed because of weakened boundaries.”

I scanned the darkness and thought I could pick out another fragment forming in the distance. And the lightburst...it was a tiny bit larger. “So the fragments grew around small weaknesses between this dimension and ours.

The lightburst consolidated as a reaction—it became the uncorrupted region of the nowhere. A kind of...safe room in a quarantine zone, perhaps?”

“Yes,” Chet said. “Yes, that feels correct.”

There was another piece. Something more to this. “If the somewhere is leaking into here,” I said, “did the nowhere in turn leak into our dimension? What shape would that take?”

The answer was right before us. Other diones appeared in the vision, coming through the portal, each leaving a tiny addition to the wall—more matter, and another swirl each. These learned to jump in and out, and no more died alone in here.

“Cytonics,” Chet whispered. “This is how it happened. The nowhere leaked into our dimension, and it...changed people living near the breach. It made *us*.”

“It’s like...interdimensional radiation,” I said, “that infuses people with the nowhere?”

I felt a surreal sense of disconnect as—in the near distance—another fragment grew in fast motion. Other people appeared on it eventually, but of a different species. Varvax. The Krell, though they didn’t have their exoskeletons. They were little crabs, and...

I felt the two species connect, speak mind-to-mind before they even got close enough to shout at one another. The first two species to ever meet, at least in the nowhere, and long before either had access to space travel.

I tried to listen to them, tried to focus my attention. Like squinting, but with my brain. Cytonic metaphors are weird, but that’s what it felt like. I pushed, and something in the memories encouraged me.

*Further, it said. Express your talent. Listen...*

I linked with it, and my brain interpreted what was being sent. Information, both verbal and nonverbal.

When I’d fought the drones on Detritus, I’d interpreted their instructions and responded before I consciously registered what I was hearing. This was the same. My mind, or my soul or whatever, knew what all this meant. And something clicked.

*Ahh...I thought. So that’s how you do it.*

When I listened in on others with my mind, I did it by pretending I was something I wasn't. I somehow *spoofed* being the communication's intended recipient. It let me remain shadowy, unseen—a spy.

*Good*, the memories said. Then a soft impression appeared in my mind. A place. *Go here*, the vision whispered. Alongside the words came the image of a fragment with some ruins. Then the vision vanished.

I sank to the ground, my back to the portal wall.

"It *was* the hit to your head!" M-Bot said, hovering down beside me. "I'm so sorry!"

"It wasn't that, M-Bot," I said. "I promise."

"Oh, thank Turing!"

"Who?"

"One of the fathers of computing," he said. "It felt appropriate to say."

"You did not harm her, abomination," Chet said. "I saw the vision too."

"Did you feel that last part?" I asked. "Like a voice...helping guide me..."

"I didn't feel anything like that," he said. "I saw the first fragments, the first portals, and the first cytonics...then a hint of the next place to go?"

"Yeah, I saw that," I said. "Another fragment with ruins."

"Yes," Chet said. "That's a fragment deep inside Broadsider territory, I'm afraid. But...I know that we must go there. I feel...overwhelmed."

I felt elated.

Yes, *elated*. I realized that ever since I'd discovered my powers—what my people called "the defect"—I'd been worried they were something nefarious. I'd thought that maybe I was something terrible. A delver in embryo, or something monstrous.

But I *wasn't*. Cytonic powers were just a mutation. Granted, a bizarre one caused by my ancestors being exposed to the nowhere's leakage into the somewhere. But nothing terrible grew within me. I was just...well, me.

Saints. I'd *needed* to see that. A simple revelation, yes, but it changed everything. I knew what I was. I knew how I had come to be. And it was no wonder that powers manifested in our people—Detritus had one of these portals, perhaps helping activate the latent talent from our bloodlines.

This was part of the information the elder cytonics had left, the thing they'd wanted me to know. *You are not a monster*, the impression lingered. *You are one of us. You are wonderful. You are natural. You are loved.*

And along with that, a nudge to help me develop further in my talents. A push, and some understanding. I had the sense that if my talents had been different, I would have been nudged a different way, to develop those abilities instead.

I glanced at Chet, who was grinning practically ear to ear.

"I feel left out," M-Bot said. "You're both experiencing different emotions from the ones I am. And...this is all very confusing. What is one supposed to *do* with all of these emotions? What are they *for*? What's the purpose?"

"I don't think they have any specific purposes," I said.

"Of course they do. Otherwise they wouldn't have evolved in you and then been programmed into me. But...I suppose there are things that are evolutionarily neutral, and perhaps saying 'purpose' implies too much volition behind the process. Unless you believe in God, which I'm not sure that I do. I mean, I *was* created by someone. Hummmm..."

I took a few deep breaths, trying to digest what I'd seen. "Chet," I said. "Did you see those varvax on the nearby fragment?"

"I did indeed, and I find it curious. The two fragments were relatively near to one another. Diones and varvax."

"Well," M-Bot said. "I don't know what exactly you saw, but histories show that those two peoples traveled between worlds cytonically before they did it with starships."

"Yeah," I said. "The same thing happened to humans and the kitsen, and maybe other species. I never realized the hole in that. A cytonic usually needs a direction to go, instructions, to hyperjump—at least very far. But this explains how; they met in the nowhere before hyperjumping between worlds."

"Abomination," Chet said, "do you have a record on when the delvers first appeared in the somewhere?"

“The initial records of the delvers occur after the First Human War began,” M-Bot said. “That was when the Phone Company—a human organization—gave hyperdrives to the people of Earth. Humans then spread throughout the galaxy. War began, and near its end the first delvers appeared. Before that time there were no reports of delvers, or even the eyes.”

I looked to Chet. He’d sensed it too—no delvers had existed at the time of this vision. So how had they appeared? What *were* the delvers?

My contemplations were interrupted as an enormous jolt shook our fragment, accompanied by an overpowering *crash*.

# 12

I grabbed my makeshift club, which I'd dropped near the front of the cavern, and stumbled out onto the loamy ground. Chet joined me, unsteady on his feet, holding on to the wooden supports at the mouth of the cavern.

Another fragment had collided with the one we were on. It looked smaller than ours, but thicker and more dense. Like a battleship made of stone.

"How did you miss that?" I demanded of Chet, pointing across the green field to the place where the two fragments were mashed together.

"I have no idea!" he said. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before!"

The ground shifted again as the "battleship" fragment shoved farther into ours, causing dirt to roll and stone to crunch. Our fragment was pushed along with it, like an old ship being pushed by a tug—a *really* aggressive tug with its boosters on overburn.

The chaos sent me to my knees. Scud, the entire fragment was shaking terribly. On Detritus I would have thought a thousand meteors were striking at once.

Chet grabbed me by the arm and helped me to my feet.

"How do we get off!" I shouted at him over the noise of rock crushing.

"I don't know!" he yelled back. "There aren't any nearby fragments!"

I struggled for balance but pointed at the "battleship" fragment. "There *is* one other place to go!"

“It’s trying *right now* to destroy us,” Chet yelled. “I don’t know that I consider it an option!”

“I’m very angry too!” M-Bot shouted from behind me. “I thought you should know, since it seems like we’re sharing!”

“Options?” I shouted at him.

“For being angry? I’ve always liked raw fury, but indignation has a certain bold flavor too, don’t you think?”

“M-Bot!”

“Sorry!” he shouted. “My databases say the proper behavior during an earthquake is to either get outside—which we’ve obviously scored good marks on, since we’re literally outside our own universe—or get to a place where nothing can fall on us. This seems to work. Yay us. Oh! And I’m not mad any longer. Wow. Do emotions always pass this quickly?”

Well, maybe the collision would subside now that we’d survived the initial impact. I looked up across the grass. The ground continued to tremble, and something else bothered me. Something I couldn’t immediately define. It was...

“The water,” I said, pointing. “The lake is empty. What happened to the water?”

“It must have drained out the bottom!” Chet said. “The fragments aren’t made entirely from acclivity stone—some have more, others less. I have hypothesized that it influences how fast they move.”

“The one crashing into us is more solid then?” I said. “It must have come up quickly, if you didn’t spot it.”

“Precisely!” Chet said. “Our current one looks to be mostly soil, so the bottom of the lake must have given out.”

That bothered me. I mean, these fragments were *already* playing with my brain. I perpetually felt like I was walking across unstable footing. As I scanned the fragment, my fears became manifest.

Rifts appeared in the soil. Widening cracks like bolts of lightning moved across the once-tranquil prairie. In these lines the soil and grass vanished, sinking out of sight.



“It’s breaking apart,” I said, forcing myself to keep my feet despite the shaking.

“Scrud!” Chet said. Ahead of us an entire section of the grassland fell away, leaving a gaping hole. “I suggest a hasty actualization of your earlier plan. We must get onto that more solid fragment!”

We dashed away from the tunnel with the portal, and it collapsed in a roar behind me. The ground, which had once felt soft and springy, now felt treacherous.

“M-Bot,” I shouted. “Stick the light-line to my back. If I jump or fall, pull upward with every bit of lift you’ve got.”

“I’m not powerful enough to carry you!”

“I don’t expect you to!”

As he complied, I tried to maintain a jog, but the tremors kept knocking me off balance. Chet wasn’t faring much better; ahead of me a particularly violent quake sent him sprawling, and then a rift opened between us.

He glanced toward me with alarm.

I jumped.

Obligingly M-Bot moved upward, pulling the light-line taut. While he couldn’t lift me completely, his efforts *did* add to my spring. I’d trained in low-g, and this wasn’t much different, so I knew how to compensate. I spanned the widening chasm and landed next to Chet.

“Marvelous!” he said as I pulled him to his feet. Together we charged toward the fragment that was causing all of this. But abruptly Chet grabbed my arm and hauled me back, halting my run as a hole opened up right in front of us, dirt pouring down like it had liquefied.

Scud. I glanced to Chet with thanks, and he pointed to the side. We scrambled that direction, rounding the hole, and reached the far edge of the fragment.

Here the ground was bunched up, the earth piled in an enormous furrow. “Get that light-line off me and attach it somewhere up above!” I shouted to M-Bot.

He zipped up to the top and attached the line, then returned trailing the red-orange rope. I looked to Chet, who nodded, grabbing the light-line.

“Just like climbing to the top of Mount Rigby!” he said. “Highest point on the fragments!” He glanced at the bunched-up soil. “Only perhaps more squishy!”

“Less heroic explorer talk!” I shouted. “More climbing!”

As if to punctuate my words, a vast section of the ground behind us fell away.

“Point taken,” Chet said, then began ascending the high furrow of trembling soil. His feet sank in, making it an obvious struggle. Fortunately, there were chunks of stone to use as footholds; he proved his skill in climbing as he located them.

I followed him up, and my lighter weight was an advantage. When I’d been younger I’d imagined growing to Amazonian heights to become a fierce swordswoman—and then I’d run out of centimeters. Instead I’d taken to imagining myself as so small that giants underestimated me, so I could therefore scamper up their backs and stab them in the ears.

There weren’t many giants to slay, but I got mileage out of my size today as I limberly scrambled up the mound of dirt, barely needing the light-line. Then I helped pull Chet out of a mire—it was tough with the dirt sliding around us. But together we managed to reach the top.

M-Bot hovered up from below. Worn out and filthy, the three of us stumbled up to a high point on the new fragment. It looked like a blasted-out landscape, ashen and cracked—but it was solid.

The fragment we’d left was in utter turmoil. Little patches of grass peeked through the churning dirt—like sections of unburned skin on the face of a pilot who had died in a crash. Those were quickly vanishing as our current fragment pushed forward. Dirt fell away in vast swaths, with chunks of acclivity stone drifting off to the sides.

In minutes, the entire fragment was gone save for some chunks of dirt stuck to the front where we stood.

“I would not believe this if I hadn’t witnessed it firsthand,” Chet whispered. “Miss Nightshade, I’ve *never* seen such an event.”

“Fragments don’t often collide?” I asked.

“On occasion, they bump at speed,” he said, “but I’ve never experienced anything more fearsome than a short jolt.” He put his hand to his head. “It’s as if the nowhere itself is trying to kill us.”

Great. Jumping into a dimension literally controlled by beings that hated me might not have been my smartest decision ever. Then again, I had genuinely needed to see that vision at the portal. So...yeah. Frying pans, fires, all that. As long as there was some warmth and I could roast some rats.

“I feel bad about the portal,” I said. “Those memories, lost...”

“All memories are lost eventually,” Chet said. “I agree this is a tragedy—but I prefer to keep my head high.” He dusted off his trousers, shook some dirt from his jacket, then smiled at me. “Think of it this way. We survived again, and we began the Path. I shall count it as a grand victory!”

“We need to get farther into pirate territory to get to the next stop though.”

“Indeed,” he said, pointing. “That direction.” Our current fragment floated perpendicular to that, so I supposed it could be worse. “We’d have to cross dozens upon dozens of fragments, however, to reach those ruins on foot.”

“So...” I said. “Time to restart Operation Ship-Steal?”

He smiled, turning and pointing a slightly different direction. “The Broadsider home base is perhaps two days’ travel. I shall need a short time, Miss Nightshade, to use my powers and devise a path forward. We may not be able to go directly; it will depend on the timing of the intersection of the fragments.”

“Let’s hope,” I said, “that no more of them intersect as violently as this one.”

# 13

While Chet sat to figure out the route, M-Bot and I went to do a little scouting. This newest fragment was the most normal of the ones I'd been on. No strange grasses, no towering trees. Not even dirt. Just good, sturdy rock. It was darker than the stone on Detritus, and was cracked like it had been through a furnace, but the way it scraped underfoot reminded me of home.

We found a small wooden building, but it had been scavenged clean. While I was inside, M-Bot called to me. I peeked out to see three starfighters shooting past in the sky.

"I think they've come to survey the destroyed fragment," M-Bot said, hovering beside me.

Made sense. We stayed out of sight, and I had a spike of fear that they'd grab Chet. Unfortunately, I realized I'd misplaced Skullbreaker in the chaos of the exploding fragment. That gave me a surprising sense of loss. The club hadn't been impressive, but it had been special because Chet had helped me make it.

As the starfighters wove through the sky, flying away from our fragment and doing a few quick maneuvers, I got a feeling for their skill. Like...like how you can tell from watching someone's warm-up routine how athletic they are. Those pilots seemed fine, but not terribly skilled.

If I could get into a ship, I should have no trouble outflying them in the short term. But how would I get through pirate territory in general? We

would need to land and study the next portal in the Path of Elders, and we couldn't do that if pirates were on our tail.

When the ships were out of sight, I hurried back to check on Chet—and found that he'd vanished. There was just the large pile of dirt heaped up on the front of the fragment near where the collision had happened.

That dirt stirred, then Chet appeared, digging himself out from where he'd apparently hidden himself. He brushed the dirt from his jacket, then spat out a little of it and grinned at me. "Not my most noble of escapes, but better than becoming a floor washer!"

"How goes the planning?" I asked him.

"A little more time, if you please."

I wandered a bit farther away—maybe twenty meters—and climbed up a small rock formation near the edge of the fragment. I stood tall, looking into the distance and admiring the view of the various nearby fragments, one of which was streaming water into the void.

Hands on my hips, I took a deep breath and couldn't help but grin. Scud, I was *loving* this. The feeling I'd had the day before—the joy of traveling with Chet—expanded. Now I'd seen firsthand that the quest was useful to me.

Exploring a strange frontier? Being forced to use some physical prowess for once? Running, climbing, jumping, and being chased by monsters? It really did feel as if I'd slipped into one of Gran-Gran's stories. Where I belonged. Where things were *right*. It was genuinely satisfying to have my life depend on whether I could escape a crumbling fragment—rather than on how well I could imitate an alien on Starsight.

I settled down on the rocks. My friends *were* in trouble, and I *did* miss them. Terribly. What I wouldn't give to be able to share this trip with them.

M-Bot hovered over, and I smiled at him. I had at least one friend here. I put my arm around his drone and pointed outward at the fragments. "What do you see?" I asked him.

"Chunks of matter."

"I see adventure," I said. "I see mysteries and striking beauty. Watch the water shimmer as it falls. Doesn't it look gorgeous?"

“Somewhat,” he admitted. “Like...little bits twinkling on and off...”

“That’s what emotions are for,” I said. “Partially. It’s not their only purpose, but it’s an important one. Do you understand that part?”

“No,” he said. “But I’m closer, maybe. I guess...I guess I wouldn’t know how great mushrooms were without feeling something when I find them. Right?”

I smiled. “I’m glad I’m here with you, M-Bot. I know you were hesitant about entering. But thank you for being my friend, for joining me.”

He wobbled in a nod. “But Spensa? I’m...still sad.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I’ve spent years upon years’ worth of processing time imagining what Commander Spears would be like. Now we’ve met him and...and he just calls me an abomination.”

“He’s coming around,” I said. “The longer he spends with you, the more he’ll see that he was wrong. But even if he doesn’t, who cares? I’m your pilot now. And I think you’re great.”

“Thanks...”

“What?”

“I said thanks. I don’t believe that statement requires qualification.”

“Yeah, but you left it dangling,” I said. “Something’s still bothering you.”

“You can tell that? How?”

“Gut feeling.”

“I don’t have guts,” M-Bot said. “So I guess you’re the expert. But...if you need to know, the bigger problem is that I’m still kind of mad at you.”

“For leaving you behind when I left Starsight?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I thought you forgave me for that.”

“I thought I did too. But I keep remembering it. Is that...normal?”

“It is for humans. Sometimes it’s too easy to forget the things you should remember—and far too easy to remember the things you really should forget.”

“It’s doubly so for me,” he said, “since I literally can’t forget things unless they’re deleted, or at least commented out of my code.”

I leaned back, putting my hands behind me to support myself as I sat and thought on what he’d said. Scud, he’d given up a lot in all of this—his wonderful ship body not the least of it. And now, to deal with all these emotions...

“I’m sorry,” I said, “for what happened to you on Starsight, M-Bot. I truly am. It broke my heart to leave you like I did.”

“But you’d make the same decision again, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “As much as it pains me to know I hurt you, if I were in that situation again...yes, I’d go save the people of Detritus.”

“It makes logical sense,” he said. “But I don’t *feel* it. What do I do to get rid of these feelings? I don’t *want* to be angry. So it’s stupid that I’m angry. It makes no sense.”

“It makes a ton of sense, actually,” I said. “You don’t have many friends—basically just me and Rig. When I left, you were being abandoned by everyone you’d known and loved. It’s not the sort of thing you get over easily.”

“Wow,” M-Bot said. “You know emotions really well, Spensa. Particularly the stupid ones.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“So what do I do?”

“Weather it,” I said. “Get better. Learn to accept that sometimes what you feel isn’t invalid, but that it doesn’t mean you have to act according to those feelings either.”

“Again I’m supposed to feel things, but then ignore those feelings. Act opposite of how they direct. Why is that?”

I shrugged. “It’s just life. But sometimes talking about it makes it feel better.”

“Huh. Yes, I believe that I do feel a little better. Strange. Why is that the case? Nothing has changed.”

“Because I’m your friend, M-Bot. And that’s what friends do. Share.”

“And do they also abandon one another to certain death?” he said, then hovered down lower. “Sorry. It just kind of slipped out. I’ll do better.”

“It’s all right,” I said, climbing to my feet. “Again, it’s okay to feel angry, M-Bot. But you’re going to have to learn to deal with it. We’re soldiers. We have responsibilities that are bigger than any one individual. So being friends doesn’t mean I won’t someday have to leave you behind again.”

“What does it mean to be friends, then?”

“It means,” I said, “that if something like that *does* have to happen, I’ll do whatever I can to return to you once the crisis is over. And you’d do the same for me, right, bud?”

“Yes,” he said, hovering higher. “Yes, because I can *move on my own* now.” He turned, looking toward Chet. “And maybe you’re right about him too. Maybe it *doesn’t* matter what he thinks. It’s hard to feel that, but I can say it. That feels like a different kind of lying. One that’s not all untrue.”

“We’ll make a human out of you yet.”

“Please no,” he said. “From what I’ve read of it, I *really* don’t want a sense of smell.”

I smiled, intending to check on Chet. I hesitated, however, as I saw we’d drifted closer to the fragment with the waterfall. We weren’t going to hit it—in fact, our current fragment seemed to have slowed to a normal speed. Serene and peaceful, as if it hadn’t just been in a horrific collision.

Something was standing on the edge of that other fragment, near the waterfall. I couldn’t make out much because of the distance, but it seemed to have...

Glowing white eyes.

I felt a mind pushing against mine.

*What...did...you...do...*

*...TO THE US?*

I backed up a few steps. The delvers had found me. Chet had said it was possible to hide in the belt out here, but...I supposed that in using my powers to initiate the vision on the Path, I’d drawn their attention.



Determined not to be intimidated, I quested out with my own cytonic senses. And I found...strength? I'd grown, here in the nowhere. I was able to brush that distant delver's mind as it projected anger at me. I picked out things it didn't intend to broadcast. They had indeed sensed what I'd done in activating the Path of Elders, and they'd sent the battleship fragment to destroy the one I'd been on.

That had taken a remarkable amount of effort, and was something they couldn't do often. It had actually been an experiment, as they felt they needed to push farther into the belt to try to find and stop me. These glowing-eyed things were the same. An experiment. Isolated individuals, who had lost a lot of their memories, were susceptible to the delvers' touch. But only non-cytonics, for this particular thing they were trying.

Saints...I felt so much more in control now, even after only one step on the Path of Elders. The experience had opened something in my brain, showing me how to hide and not draw attention while spying with my cytonics.

This delver still wasn't aware of how much I'd gleaned from it. I felt like gloating, but then I sensed it trying to attack my mind. That manifested as coldness and pressure; it was as if I'd been plunged into an icy lake, the cold seeping like water through my skin, toward my heart.

And those voices...

*What have you done...to the Us...to the Us...*

"The Us" referred again to the delver I'd changed. The others were angry, *furious* at me. Because I'd touched and spoken to that one delver I'd persuaded not to attack Starsight. In so doing, I'd corrupted it forever. Essentially destroying one of their kind.

That made me feel sick. The friendly delver and I had connected in a beautiful way; I'd thought my actions would change things. But if the others refused to listen to me... I shivered as our fragment drifted farther from the one with the waterfall.

Chet stepped up next to me then, and jarred me from my thoughts. "You felt it too, I presume?"

"The delvers possessed someone over there," I said.

Chet nodded. “Whatever we did with the Path attracted their attention,” he said. “I find it amazing they’d risk individuality by entering the belt, but it is obviously happening. We will need to be careful moving forward.”

“Agreed.” I took a deep breath. “You finished planning our route?”

“I did indeed, Miss Nightshade,” he said, a twinkle in his eye. “Tell me. What is your opinion on sailing?”

# 14

Chet led me back to the small wooden building I'd discovered, saying that we needed to salvage some supplies. I tried explaining that it had been picked clean, but once we arrived he proceeded to take the *doors* off their hinges.

We each carried a door to the edge of the fragment, where we waited an hour to jump across to the next approaching fragment. It was a tropical one, full of tall trees with bare trunks and leaves only at the tops. We took our time crossing this one, scavenging for some strange oversized nuts the size of a person's head. They weren't coconuts—I knew those from my studies on Old Earth—but were similar.

We spent the evening hollowing the nuts out by prying off the tops and pulling out the long, stringy pulp by hand. Afterward we stretched the interior membrane of each one over the hole we'd made and set it to dry.

That night, I again failed at contacting Jorgen. But I woke up eager and excited for the day's trek—because while we'd slept, our next fragment had approached.

An ocean.

It was the most bizarre thing I'd seen here yet. The sides were stone like the bottom, but they were only about a meter thick. Beyond was water; essentially the fragment was an enormous bowl. It seemed larger than most fragments we'd traveled on, extending for kilometers into the distance.

Chet showed me how to use the pulp—which had become cordlike as it dried—to tie the doors together and lash the hollowed-out nuts to them. The

nuts were watertight and filled with air. So when we shoved off into the ocean, we had a functional raft.

It was awesome.

Even M-Bot was impressed. He buzzed around us, complimenting the raft's "structural integrity" and "remarkable buoyancy." We named the ship the *Not-ilus* and I stood proudly at the prow—well, the flat front end I declared the prow. Chet chuckled softly, weaving oars from bent reeds and leftover nut-guts.

It was slow going, but I still felt like I was some ancient Polynesian hero sailing the ocean for the first time. Plus it got even *better*. Because the ocean had sea monsters.

I saw them swimming below as sinuous shapes and immediately fell to my knees, worried. And excited. Because, you know. *Sea monsters*.

I glanced at Chet, who was whistling softly and braiding some nut-guts into a stronger cord. One did not act so cheekily nonchalant by accident; he wasn't worried about the sea monsters, whatever they were.

"Oh!" M-Bot said, hovering past me. "Look! Ah! Um, turn around! About-face! Reverse rudder or whatever! We're going to *get eaten*!"

Chet calmly tossed me the rope, one end of which he'd fashioned into a loop. Then he handed me a small red fruit he'd harvested somewhere.

"Float that out beside us," he said, "then set the loop around it in the water and get ready to pull."

I could hardly contain myself as I did what he said. I stood at the ready as a blue serpentine head came up and snatched the fruit. I yanked with a mighty pull, looping the thing around the neck, which let out a gaping...

...yawn?

Well, it *was* a sea monster, even if it barely noticed that I'd captured it. Instead it chewed on the fruit, bringing up another coil of its body from the depths below. It was like a snake, perhaps as thick as a man's thigh, but had little flippered legs along its very long body. It bit happily at the fruit, then looked up at me with pleading eyes, its head wagging in the water.

"You," I told it, "shall be known as Gnash the Slaughterer."

It made a bubbling sound, then turned eagerly as Chet tossed another fruit far out into the ocean. It began moving, towing us along as I yelped and held tight to the rope.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said, hovering along beside my head, “I don’t think that creature is likely to slaughter anything.”

“It’s a garqua,” Chet explained, settling back down on the raft—er, the deck of our mighty ship. “They’re not dangerous. They come from Monrome.”

“Monrome?” I asked.

“Dione homeworld?” Chet said. “Even I know that, and I’ve forgotten the names of my parents.” At my blank stare, he continued. “No predators on Monrome.”

“What?” I said. “*None?*”

“None,” Chet said. “Scavengers and herbivores only.”

I glanced at M-Bot, who bobbed in the air to simulate nodding. “It’s true,” he said. “Though I doubt this one came directly from the dione homeworld—they have colonized nearly a hundred planets and have a habit of importing their local wildlife. After, ah, exterminating the local species for being too brutal and aggressive.”

“Sounds like them,” I said. “Still feels odd to me.”

“Did you assume every planet had the same ecological hierarchy as Earth?” M-Bot asked.

“Well...yeah,” I said. “I mean, it seems pretty fundamental. Things eat other things.”

“It seems fundamental,” Chet said, “because it’s the way it was for us. Doesn’t mean it *has* to be that way everywhere.”

Huh. I continued holding Gnash’s leash. She stopped to eat the fruit Chet had thrown—but then continued on, pulling us along contentedly. She appeared to think she’d find another piece of fruit if she kept going that direction, something Chet reinforced by occasionally tossing out another.

I contemplated the idea of a world—well, many worlds, if M-Bot was right—without predators. No hunting, no killing? How did survival of the

fittest and all that work? At any rate, no *wonder* the diones thought everyone else was too aggressive.

The more I thought about it though, the more annoyed I became at them. They acted like they were superior—like they’d developed “prime intelligence” or whatever—because their society was peaceful. But they’d simply evolved on a planet without predators. They hadn’t become enlightened or learned a better way—they merely assumed their way was how it was meant to be.

I supposed lots of species were like that, my own included. But we weren’t conquering the galaxy—currently—or forcing everyone to live by our rules. Currently.

We spent the better part of the day crossing the ocean fragment. When we reached the far side we thanked Gnash with some more fruit and then moved on. And let it be known that M-Bot was totally wrong. Gnash was an *excellent* slaughterer, at least when it came to fruit.

We slept that night on a fragment with many caves that reminded me of home, and I think I got my best sleep of the entire trip there, comforted by the peaceful sound of water echoing as it dripped. The next day was full of different delights. Cliffs to scale, two swamps with utterly different scents—really, one smelled like cinnamon, like...someone I’d known once. After that, we crossed a fragment broken by winding canyons and beautiful patterns of colored stone.

By the end of the day, Chet informed me that we were nearing the Broadsider pirate base, and I found myself strangely melancholy. Once we got a ship, we would travel faster—and I *was* eager to take to the sky. But I had truly enjoyed the time I’d spent traveling.

Flying the rest of the way...well, it seemed that would undermine the epic nature of my quest a tad. That said, as I considered, I decided that many of the heroes from the stories would have used a starfighter if one had been available. Gilgamesh, for example, would totally have done it. (Not sure about Xuanzang, admittedly. He’d probably have been all about the need for the journey to refine him, or some other super-wise Zen stuff.)

We ended the day on a jungle fragment that I liked more than the first one I'd been on. It had less underbrush and all the plants were blue, which I found relaxing. It was just a more natural color.

According to Chet, this fragment would pass the pirate base the next day. So we decided to camp, and he sent M-Bot to scan for life forms that could be dangerous.

"I doubt that there are large beasts on this fragment," Chet explained to the AI, "but it is better to be careful than to be eaten."

"Plus," I added, "if the delvers *can* possess bodies, they might be able to grab one we don't expect. So see what kind of life there is, big or small. I'd rather not be surprised by a group of zombie chipmunks."

"Zombie...chipmunks?" Chet said.

"It would likely be a fun fight," I said. "With lots of kicking. Probably feels about the same to kick a chipmunk as it does to kick a rat."

"And...how many rats have you kicked, Miss Nightshade?"

"Only the ones that were asking for it," I said, smacking my fist into my palm.

M-Bot zipped off, and Chet and I began pulling down blue fronds and making bedding out of them. I kind of wished we could make a fire like in the stories, but it never felt cold in here—or hot. Plus the smoke would give us away.

Soon we each had a nice bed. And though I'd liked the caverns, this was probably going to be the softest of our nights in the nowhere.

"Thank you," I said to Chet as I settled into mine, "for all of this."

"I've been paid each day," he said. "You don't need to thank me!"

And each day he'd watched the reality icon with hunger. But I moved past that. "You haven't just guided me, Chet. You've taught me and shown me incredible things."

"Well," he said, "at the very least I'm glad you were able to see an ocean of sorts. I *did* promise you they were fun to explore! Regardless, no need to thank me. You saved my life on that fragment that was being destroyed!"

"And you saved mine."

“A sign that we’re an excellent team!” he said, settling back into his nest of fronds. More solemnly, he continued, “Truly, Miss Nightshade, I’ve rarely had such an invigorating companion. Plus you encouraged me toward a goal I’ve been avoiding for far too long. For that I thank *you*.”

I nodded in agreement. “What are we likely to face tomorrow? Will the pirates be armed with modern weapons, for example?”

“Yes,” he said. “But remember they are mostly outcasts—not a true military force. They have gathered together more out of necessity, to be near other minds.”

“Any idea why that helps us not forget in here?” I asked.

“It *is* curious, isn’t it? It’s like...people are all a little more *real* when they’re together. Maybe together we remind one another what it is to be alive. To have family.”

He said that last word with a hint of longing, looking upward through the trees. He’d forgotten his family, whoever they had been. I wished that he could see M-Bot as a lost friend, reunited, and not an “abomination.” But I decided not to bring the issue up again at the moment.

We fell silent for a while, then Chet spoke, his voice softer. “I once had a ship in here. I decided to fly it all the way to the lightburst—to get out that way, if I could, and return to whatever life I’d left behind. But...I lost myself, flying. I think that’s when I finally lost the last of my memories of my family, you see. Out there on your own, you don’t have anything to remind you of who you are.

“Down on the fragments, everything—the stones, the structures, the trees—helps somehow. It *grounds* us, one might say. Ha! At any rate, I think we two will be fine flying together. We’ll have each other, plus your icon. It should be enough. *Should* be...”

Chet trailed off and I shivered, imagining losing so much. I had to stay focused. Find my answers and get home. It had been...how long since I’d entered the nowhere? Maybe a week?

*How many times have I slept?* I wondered. *Three? Or has it been four?*

It was unnerving that I couldn’t remember. So I focused on the upcoming mission. “We’ll send M-Bot to do some reconnaissance once



we're on the pirate faction's fragment," I told Chet. "They may not be a true military, but they've got to be somewhat competent to have stolen ships and kept them."

"That is true," Chet said. "I agree. Expect them to be modestly capable, but not military trained."

"I'll bet they sleep in shifts and have scouts on duty to watch for anyone approaching, even on foot. So we have two options, as I see it. The first is to hit them when most of their numbers are away during a fight. During a battle, the people they leave behind might be distracted enough for us to get in and steal a ship."

"Assuming all the ships aren't away at the fight," he said, "denying us our opportunity for larceny."

"I suspect they'll be smart enough to leave reserves—and if not, there will be ships in their hangars undergoing maintenance. M-Bot should be able to determine which of them are in flying shape."

"Still sounds dangerous," Chet said, leaning back in his makeshift bed. "I assume they would be *more* alert during a fight, not less."

"Well, our second option is to strike during a long shift when most of them are asleep. We move in stealthily, have M-Bot hack through a ship's security, then fly out with our prize before anyone knows what's happening."

"They'll give chase," Chet noted.

"Trust me, Chet," I said, "I might not know how to build a raft, but I won't have trouble outflying anyone in that group."

"Marvelous! I shall look forward to our flight, then."

M-Bot came zipping back. "I used infrared scanners to search for warm life forms, and didn't find anything larger than a worm," he announced. "No chipmunks, zombified or otherwise."

"Thanks," I said.

"That...wasn't a 'made you look' joke, was it?" he asked. "Sending me out to look for things? I can't tell."

I'd completely forgotten about pranking him that once, so it took me a moment to remember what he was referencing. "No joke," I promised him.

“We really did want you to look for dangers on this fragment.”

“Thanks,” he said, then flew off again, likely to begin searching for mushrooms. I sat there for a while, staring upward...

Then I jumped when M-Bot returned.

How...how long had I just been sitting there, not noticing the passage of time? Chet was already asleep.

I couldn't tell. It could have been a minute, could have been an hour. But M-Bot had seven different mushroom samples in his grabber claws and was laying them out to catalog them. So...scud.

I turned over in my bed, worried about that sudden passage of time. Gran-Gran had told me about a man who'd accidentally slept for hundreds of years. That wouldn't happen to me, would it? Normally a thought like that might have kept me awake. But this time I fell right to sleep.

# INTERLUDE

Floating.

I quested out, searching as I had before. Like on other nights, I didn't find anything. I was nearly pulled down by my own tiredness again.

But no. No, I was Defiant. Plus, I was better with my powers than I'd ever been. I was stronger than sleep, stronger than my own worst instincts. Strong enough to...

Push through. I latched onto the familiar sensation of Jorgen's mind and pulled myself toward it.

This time I interrupted him shaving.

He jumped as he saw me suddenly reflected in his mirror, standing beside him in the lavish bathroom. It had *two* sinks. He was wearing a towel, fortunately, but I do have to say...boy took care of himself. Mandatory PT for pilots didn't give a fellow pecs like that, not without some extra reps at the gym.

"Spin!" he snapped. "This is *not* a good time."

"Oh, and last time was better?" I said, folding my arms and refusing to be embarrassed. "At least you're not getting shot at."

He reached for his towel to wipe away the shaving suds covering half his face, then—wisely—stopped. Finally, he took a deep breath. "Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to snap at you. You certainly couldn't have known you'd find me in a compromising position."

"Huh," I said. "How do you do that?"

"What?"

“Stay calm,” I said. “Be so understanding.”

“Command training.”

“Bull,” I said. “I know your secret, Jorgen Weight. You’re a good person.”

“That’s...a secret?”

“Hush,” I said. “I have to say things like that or I’ll look like an idiot for taking so long to figure it out. It would help me out a *ton* if you’d at least *pretend* to be an actual jerkface now and then.”

“I’ll work on that,” he said, smiling.

I stepped forward, then edged around him so I could stand between him and the sink. He could only see me in the reflection, so if I stood there—facing the mirror—our height difference meant we could look each other in the eyes. He stepped back to give me room. Saints, that smile was adorable with half his face shaved. Even the tiny scabs from his healing cuts were adorable, in a grizzled warrior kind of way.

I, however, was anything *but* adorable. I’d never been one to fret over my appearance—even when I tried during my school days, kids used to joke that I looked like a rodent. They felt so brilliant realizing that the rat girl was a bit mousy.

That said, *scud*. “I need to find a hairbrush, don’t I?” I said. “And a shower. Or seven.”

“You look just fine.”

“Ah, ‘just fine.’ Exactly what a woman loves to hear.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I meant to say that you look like a barbarian who just finished killing her seventeenth rabid tiger to make a necklace out of their incisors.”

“Really?” I said, tearing up. I mean, it was silly but...you know, he was trying.

“It’s like you came strolling directly out of a barbarian story,” he said. “Except for the jumpsuit.”

“I can fix that,” I said, reaching for the zipper.

The way his eyes bulged was totally worth it. But he looked so uncomfortable that I spun around to face him, raising my hands. “Joking!

I'm *joking*, Jorgen. Don't faint or anything!"

He shook his head, reaching for a washcloth to wipe the suds from his face. That left his face half-covered with black stubble, which would have been sexy, except...you know, the fact that it was only half the face. I turned back around toward the mirror.

"What happened to your face anyway?" I asked.

Jorgen grimaced. "I squeezed a slug. It didn't appreciate it and let me know."

I wanted more details, but I knew our time was short so I didn't press him.

"I lied earlier, Spensa," he said. "Command training did *not* prepare me for you. Nothing could have done that. Anyway, I suppose I should ask for a report."

"Days passed?" I asked him.

"Since our last visit? Five."

Yeah, time was odd in the nowhere. I *thought* it had only been three for me, but I couldn't tell for certain. "I've made progress on my quest," I explained. "I'll tell you about that in a minute, but first I have more important intel. Jorgen...I think the Superiority leaders are trying to make a deal with the delvers. An alliance."

He blinked, then took a deep breath. "That's unfortunate."

"That's all you can say?"

"I was taught not to curse in front of a lady."

"Good thing there are none of those here, eh?"

He smiled. "You say you think they'll make a deal. They haven't yet?"

"Not that I know," I said. "But the delvers *were* intrigued by what Winzik said. And judging by what I've felt from them...I think it will happen. Unless we find a way to stop it."

"I'll report this to Cobb and the command staff," he said. "It confirms our worst fears, that the delver summoning wasn't an anomaly—but an appetizer. Anything else?"

"I found a kind of heritage site," I said. "It's hard to explain, but I saw some of the history of cytonics, and was taught a little how to better use my

abilities. Jorgen, I'm pretty sure *we* were made when the nowhere leaked into our reality and changed people living nearby."

"Changed?"

"Think of it like a mutation," I said. "Caused by specialized radiation seeping through weak spots between dimensions. It means we're not freaks. We're mutations."

"Well," he said, rubbing his chin in thought. "Though I don't like the word 'freak,' many would call a mutation *exactly* the sort of thing that makes you one. Certainly, a 'defect' could be caused by a mutation. So I'm not sure what you're saying."

"I'm saying that we're not some kind of sleeper agent for the delvers," I said. "We predate them, in fact. What's happened is that cytonics have blended with the nowhere—giving us access to it, letting us bend *our* reality to work the way *it* does."

He nodded slowly. "If what you say is true, then we could potentially make more cytonic people."

"There's a portal," I said, "on Detritus, in the tunnels near Igneous. Search northeast of the cavern, near some old pipes in a place with some strange patterns carved in the stone. You might want to study it."

"I'll put some people on it," he said.

"Be careful," I noted. "A cytonic can fall through and get stuck in here—and it's hard to get out. So don't, you know, pull a Spensa."

"Will do," he said, meeting my eyes in the reflection. "This *is* important. I'm glad you stayed, even if it means...well, this." He gestured at my ghostly state.

"I'm going to continue on the Path," I said. "First I have to deal with a bunch of pirates though."

"There are *pirates* in the nowhere?" he asked.

"Yeah. Awesome, isn't it?"

"I thought the place was...well...nothingness."

"Kind of is, kind of isn't?" I said. "It's complicated. I'm going to steal a starfighter tomorrow, which should let me get to the next memory dump."

He backed up to lean against the wall, his arms folded, thoughtful. And for the first time I noticed how tired he looked. It was tough to tell with Jorgen, who always seemed so upright and solid—his dark brown skin making it harder to make out signs of fatigue like bags under his eyes.

“Jorgen?” I said. “You all right?”

“Things are tense here. We’ve found a way to protect ourselves—the planet’s defenses are fully online, thanks to Rig and the engineers.”

“Well, that’s good. You’re safe.”

“Too safe,” he said. “The galaxy is collapsing under the control of a tyrant while we’re hiding. I know we barely started playing on the galactic stage, but it feels wrong to hide. We should be doing something.” He grimaced. “It’s politics, Spensa. You would be indignant if you were here.”

“You can be indignant on my behalf.”

“I’m trying,” he said. “But you know how my parents are. I love them, Spensa, but...they’re partially responsible. They would have us keep hiding, hoping the enemy will just leave us alone. I know that will never happen. I knew it *before* you told me about what’s happening with the delvers.”

“Maybe my news will be enough to get them to listen.”

“Maybe,” he said, sounding entirely unconvinced.

I glanced around at the decor. I’d noticed that this wasn’t some standard DDF bunkhouse latrine, but now I saw more. Was that *gold* on the trim? White marble?

“You’re home,” I guessed. “Trying to persuade your parents?”

“I thought maybe they’d listen if I could talk to them outside a formal context. I should have known—they’ve arranged four dinners for me, all with eligible young women from the lower caverns.”

The rich caverns, he meant. The ones best protected from surface attacks. “Good thing I’m not the jealous type,” I said.

“Kind of wish you were,” he said. “If you’d swing by and decapitate one or two of them, maybe the others would give up.”

“Jorgen, please,” I said. “Decapitation is reserved for worthy enemies on the battlefield.”

This coaxed a full-on smile from him. He walked back up to me, and though we couldn't touch, I could *feel* his mind behind me—and I successfully resisted the urge to probe his mind with my new talents. We stood there, looking, feeling, for a short time. Because it was all we had.

"You know," I finally said, "I'm a *little* surprised to find out you don't shower in your uniform. I half figured there was some outdated rule that required you to wear it at all times, or suffer one sixteenth of a demerit."

"Wait until someone hears that I had a girl in the bathroom with me," he said.

"I'm sure invisible girls don't count," I said, and felt myself start to fade. "Take care of yourself, Jorgen."

"Same to you," he said. "Consider it an order."

I nodded, reaching for him. I felt like I got an armful of something—something that was *him*—as it all vanished and I was dumped back into the nowhere. His essence, like his scent, lingered—as did the picture of him in my head, half-shaven, weary.

Still, this was a success. I'd been able to find him again, and I was more confident in my powers. So confident, in fact, that I did something that might have been stupid. I went looking for the delvers.

Last time I'd dreamed like this, I'd overheard them engaging in an important conversation. Could I do that again? I quested outward, trying to capture the same...sensation as last time. The same location? It was wrong to think of anything in this place as having locations. It was more like frequencies or—

Something slammed into my mind.

*It was you!* Brade said. *You were watching before. I told Winzik, but he didn't believe me!*

I tried to pull away, but she was better trained than I was. And she seemed to have some kind of ability to hold on to my mind in a way I'd never experienced before. I was like a fly in a web, buzzing about but held tight by Brade's own mind.

*I knew you were alive,* she said. *You did escape into the nowhere, didn't you? Little cricket, sneaking about.*



*Brade, I responded. You don't have to be like this. You don't have to—*

*Of course I don't, she said. You know what I hate most about you, Alanik? It's that you aren't willing to admit, even for the shortest moment, that I'm capable of making my own decisions. To you, I'm merely a misguided dupe.*

*Winzik is going to kill all the cytonics, I said. That's the promise he made to the delvers. You know that. You're the one who communicated the offer!*

In response, she laughed. She either didn't care or had some plan I didn't understand. And...with my improving senses, I could feel a little more. That to her, my complaints were simplistic. Perhaps insultingly so.

She tried to rip my mind apart. But there was one thing I'd learned by sticking up for myself in the past: bullies expect you to fold.

I leaned into the fight. I didn't whimper, or curl up, or back away. I threw myself at Brade with everything I had. Though I was formless, just a collection of thoughts, our minds could clash. Like two bursts of light throwing sparks. Two stars meeting.

She was trained. But I was ferocious.

Brade broke first, then fled, leaving me exhausted as I slowly faded into proper dreams, highlighted by half-shaven officers and epic journeys on sailing ships pulled by dragons.

# **PART THREE**







# 15

Together, Chet and I slipped onto the pirate base fragment. Our touchpoint was a good half hour from the base, so as we crept closer and closer, Chet showed me how to keep a low profile and stay behind tree or hill cover. We also sent M-Bot to scout a path for us, telling him to use his infrared to watch for heat signatures that might indicate a sentry.

As we crept along, I thought of what I'd seen the previous night. Once again, my interactions with Jorgen and Brade were crisp and clear in my mind—and I'd been a little more in control, a little more active in what I'd been doing. That excited me. I was improving.

The terrain here was dotted with scraggly trees that were like stumpy, Spensa-size analogues to the massive ones from the last jungle fragment. Various boulders and hills made for a poor killing field. I'd have set up my base on a sturdy, flat fragment with minimal cover. Maybe losing one of their ships would teach these pirates a lesson, because getting up close was *way* too easy.

I was getting antsy. Eager. If this went well, I'd be flying before the hour was out. Chet and I staked out a tree-topped small hill some fifty meters from the base's buildings. Together, on our bellies, we inched up beneath the trees to where we could see over the top of the hill and study the base.

As far as we could tell, we'd been able to approach unnoticed. Unfortunately, we couldn't rule out hidden cameras. It would depend on what the pirates had been able to salvage. So I watched for any signs the

pirates were on alert. Their base was made up of three large structures, rectangular with rounded tops. Like old-school hangars. It was a nostalgic design but didn't make much sense with modern starfighters, which were universally VTOL aircraft thanks to acclivity stone.

"Do you suppose they built those structures?" I asked Chet.

"Doubtful," Chet whispered back. "From what I understand, the pirate factions each set up on fragments with preexisting buildings. Old outposts or the like."

"Will this fragment have a portal?"

"It's possible, but unlikely. Most do not, after all."

I nodded, thinking it through. We'd seen how fragments grew—matter collected around little pinprick weaknesses between dimensions, eventually forming into these landscapes. I didn't know for certain if that matter slipped in from the somewhere or was just replicated here. Did this mean... the caverns of Detritus had formed because bits of rock had slipped into the nowhere?

There was no way to tell right now. But either way, it did seem Chet was right about the portals not being on most fragments. Maybe those only formed on fragments where the holes between dimensions were "big" enough that cytonics could get through?

Well, for now I needed to keep my mind on stealing a ship. Of the three hangars, two were dark at the moment. The third—the one in the center—had its bay door open wide, and flashes of light inside indicated welding or electrical work going on. I was surprised to see electricity at first—but most modern starfighters had energy-packed power matrixes that could last years. Plug one of those in, and you'd be able to power the lights and equipment of a hangar like this.

"My sensors indicate two people keeping watch," M-Bot whispered from where he hovered at my side. "One at the window directly ahead in the lit hangar. Another right inside the bay doors. If they're using electronic surveillance, it's wired, as I don't detect broadcasts on any known frequencies."

“They won’t broadcast carelessly, abomination,” Chet whispered. “Old habits will prevent them.”

“Noted, wart-eyeball,” M-Bot said.

We sat in silence for a moment.

“Okay,” Chet whispered. “I...I have to ask. ‘Wart-eyeball’?”

“I was going to call you wart-face,” M-Bot said, “as humans often append ‘face’ to insults, but warts are frequently on faces. I instead picked a body part that doesn’t usually grow warts—a way of implying your stupidity is irrational to the point of implausibility.”

Chet glanced at me.

“Him being weird does *not* mean he’s an abomination,” I whispered.

“I was more trying to decide if that insult rated a one or a zero,” Chet muttered, looking back at the hangars. “So, Miss Nightshade, how would you like to proceed? I believe your military training supersedes my experience in this instance.”

“Let me think and observe,” I said. I couldn’t get a good look at the pirate in the window, but they didn’t seem to be keeping a close watch. The other one that M-Bot had noted strolled out into the light, a rifle hanging from his shoulder.

To my surprise he was human, and had a patchy beard that hadn’t grown in straight. He wore a long overcoat, a T-shirt, jeans, and boots. Oh, and a hat.

*A nautical hat.* Like, a full-on tricorn.

I could barely hold in a thrilled squeal.

“What?” Chet whispered, noticing my grin.

“These ones actually *look* like pirates!”

“Indeed,” Chet said. “Human traditions have had a large influence on populations like these. From what I’ve been able to gather, our conquest of the galaxy made it trendy—perhaps a little exotic—to use human terms and fashion for outlaws.” He squinted. “That said, I didn’t expect to find an actual human among their ranks. Not a lot of us around these days.”

The pirate in the window leaned out and called something. They were definitely a dione—a right, judging by their red coloring.



“Looks like they’re doing some repairs,” I said. “M-Bot, swing around the rear and see if you can get a count on how many people are inside. If it appears safe, hover up to one of those windows and learn what you can about the starfighters.”

“Understood,” he said, and zoomed off. He was extremely quiet—that was why I’d been able to use the drone for spy missions. I wished we still had the holographic projector to give him some limited camouflage.

Fortunately, that guard didn’t seem particularly observant. He yawned as he strolled back toward the hangar opening.

“Miss Nightshade,” Chet said, “what we are about to try is much more dangerous than our previous endeavors. That guard is armed, and we risk capture or wounding.”

“I’m willing to take the risk.”

“As am I!” Chet said. “But I feel that we should, out of an abundance of caution, leave your icon behind.”

“Leave it *behind*?” I said. “Why in the stars would we do that?”

“That icon is one of the most valuable things in the nowhere,” he explained in a hushed tone. “If we are captured, I would not want the pirates to gain possession of it. Instead, I feel we should bury it here. If we succeed in claiming a ship, we can return at some future date and recover it. If we fail, then the icon will be safe.”

“But we need it to fly out there!” I said. “Without it, we’ll lose our memories.”

“It is the ashes that are important for our immediate travels,” Chet said. “With a pocket full of those, we can go months without any dangerous effects. And so, we can bring those with us and risk their loss—but keep the much more valuable object hidden.”

Scud. There was a logic to his words. If this went wrong, I’d be much happier if my icon was safe. But at the same time, I had seen the way Chet stared at it. I wanted to trust him—I *did* trust him—but...if he wanted to take the icon, then persuading me to bury it here would be a great first step.

I wavered. Chet had treated me with nothing but honor so far, but my concerns hovered at the back of my mind. He’d appeared in *such* an

unusual way, specifically when I needed him. M-Bot's old pilot, conveniently missing the memories that could help him prove who he'd been.

"Hiding the icon is probably a good idea," I said to Chet, so he wouldn't sense my suspicions. I fished out the pouch and made a show of dumping the reality ashes back into my pocket—but I also palmed the pin. Then I buried the pouch as he'd suggested, except empty. Afterward I handed him a small pinch of ashes. "In case we get split up," I told him.

He stared at the ashes an uncomfortably long time before tucking them away, and as his attention was on them I covertly slipped the pin into another pocket.

Soon, M-Bot came hovering in from behind. "There are three pirates working in the hangar," he whispered to us. "And one other person in an inner room. No other heat signatures in the building."

Right. That made six total in that hangar. The guard, the one at the window, the one farther inside, and three workers.

"There are ten other heat signatures," M-Bot whispered. "Six in one hangar building, four in the other. I think those are all asleep. At least, their heat signatures indicate recumbent figures in smaller rooms."

"Probably divided into three flights," I guessed. "Each hangar houses a flight, and one group is left on duty to watch every time the others sleep."

"Agreed," M-Bot said. "There are four starships in the open hangar, and one is being worked on by the mechanics. Six people. Four pilots, two ground crew maybe?"

"That sounds likely," I whispered. "Any way into that open hangar from behind?"

"There is a small open door at the rear," M-Bot said. "Probably to let air in during the welding."

"Awesome," I said. "We should strike while the other two flights are asleep. Chet, your job is to make a distraction. Can you do something that isn't so dangerous as to make them sound the alarm, but which has a good chance of drawing the attention of not only the guards but the three mechanics too?"

“Possibly,” he said. “The Broadsiders are known as the most levelheaded of the pirate factions. I’ve encountered other guides or groups who have traded with them, or even been employed by them for a short time. I think it will be safe enough to walk up with some reality ashes and offer to trade.”

“How likely are they to grab you?” I asked. “Steal the ashes and enslave you?”

“It’s a distinct possibility,” he admitted. “But again, I believe it’s a worthwhile risk. I don’t trust any pirates, but if I were going to approach a faction in this manner, the Broadsiders are the ones I’d choose. They should be interested in trading, but will want to keep a good eye—or ten, depending on the species—on me just to be careful.”

“Let’s go with it then,” I said. “M-Bot and I will sneak around back. Once you’ve distracted the pirates, we’ll slip into the hangar from behind and hot-wire a starfighter.”

“And you’re certain you can accomplish that feat?” Chet asked.

“Well, little in life is *absolutely* certain,” M-Bot said. “But I find it *highly* unlikely that these pirates have security I can’t instantly break. I’d say it’s more likely that you spontaneously grow a wart from your eye. You, um, wart-eye.”

I eyed him. “Chet’s right. That’s *definitely* a zero.”

“Ready then,” Chet said. “Let’s do this.”

“Once I have the ship,” I said, “we’ll activate the weapons and force the pirates to lie on the floor. Run for the ship and climb up into the cockpit. We’ll escape, and then we can send M-Bot to sneak back and grab the icon.”

“An excellent plan,” Chet said. “When do I make the distraction?”

“I’ll send M-Bot to signal you when I’m in position. Then count to a hundred before you go for it.”

We shared a nod, and then I withdrew to begin sneaking around to the other side of the base.

# 16

The first thing I did was send M-Bot back to spy on Chet.

“I buried the pouch for my pin under a rock near the trees,” I told him. “Covertly watch to see if he digs it up. If he doesn’t, stealthily join me behind the pirate base.”

“Uh...”

“I’ll explain later,” I said, and waved him off. He left.

My heart thundering in my chest, I continued to sneak around the side of the compound. It was just like creeping up on a rat, only there was more light and these doofs were less observant. I made it to the other side of the compound easily, and found a good spot to watch near a large boulder.

The hangar had a small, person-size doorway on this side. Through it I could clearly see the mechanics working on the landing gear of one of the starfighters—two diones and one of the feathered aliens I’d seen when I first entered the nowhere. They serviced a narrow, sleek vessel that was probably a scouting model. Sparks flew as they welded.

I waited, anxious. I didn’t want to be distrustful. Scud, Chet had helped me so much. But I couldn’t deny the way he looked at the icon, and it seemed incredibly suspicious that he’d asked me to leave it behind.

I nearly yelped when M-Bot hovered up to me a few minutes later. Stars, he was quiet.

“He doesn’t appear to be digging at anything, Spensa,” M-Bot whispered. “He’s just waiting.”

“Okay, good,” I said, relaxing.

“Do you think he’s going to betray us?”

“I don’t *want* to think that,” I said, “but I can’t help being suspicious.” I’d tried so hard to trust Brade, and where had that gotten me? “Go tell him I’m in position. He can start with the distraction.”

M-Bot zipped off again. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. My worry was unfounded.

Unless...

If *I’d* been planning to betray my companion, I wouldn’t merely steal the pin. I’d do something to disrupt the plan, making certain she got captured by the pirates. That way I wouldn’t have to worry about her following me as I made off with the prize.

Scud. Now that I’d thought of it, I couldn’t get it out of my head. If Chet simply grabbed the icon and ran, I could conceivably steal the ship and come after him. But if he waited until I was in the middle of the theft, then sold me out, he could keep the icon while making sure I was taken care of.

Again, I didn’t *want* to believe it. I almost discarded the worry entirely—but then I thought about the way he *changed* whenever he saw the icon. And what *were* the chances that I’d enter the nowhere and immediately find Commander Spears?

While I didn’t actually think some kind of evil wizard was involved—that was more a metaphor—something *was* seriously strange about all of this. I couldn’t help feeling I was being toyed with, and Chet was at the center of it.

I made a snap decision. I wouldn’t abandon the plan, but neither would I walk straight into a potential trap. First I pulled out my father’s pin, then dug a quick hole beside my boulder.

M-Bot came hovering back as I was finishing. “I...thought you already buried that,” he said.

“I buried the pouch, but kept the pin,” I explained. “I’m worried Chet is going to betray us, and this is the best way I can think of to protect the pin in case we get captured.”

I felt oddly reluctant to part with it. Like, it almost seemed to cling to my fingers as I put it in the hole. I couldn't help thinking it was *sad* to have me abandon it. This place was messing with me in strange ways.

The mechanics in the hangar stood up and looked out toward where Chet had been hiding. Distraction begun.

"So what do we do?" M-Bot whispered.

"In case my worries are correct, we're not going to steal the ship Chet assumes we will. Which of those other hangars has the fewest sleeping people?"

"The one directly to the right," he said. "It only has four. But... Spensa...are you sure about this?"

"It's not my job to be sure," I said. "It's my job to do my best anyway. Come on."

We slipped out from behind cover and reached the hangar easily. Sneaking around on dirt and grass was simple. Just had to test each step for leaves or twigs.

The doors were locked, but one of the nearby windows was unlatched. M-Bot was able to slip in, and a moment later the door into the left side of the structure—the part with bunks, rather than the ship storage—clicked. I eased it open, then stepped into a dark hallway.

The place had a clinical feel to it, like the hallways of Platform Prime. Too clean, and it smelled sterile. The doorways were all taller and thinner than the ones at home, and the door handles were all a good half meter higher than I expected. It left me imagining what kind of species had built this place.

In the dim light, I located a door into what I thought should be the hangar proper. M-Bot bobbed up and down—no heat signatures beyond it. This door was unlocked, and I was relieved to find a vast cavernous room. Light shone through slits in the window shades, illuminating four large starships like slumbering leviathans. It was one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever encountered.

I whispered for M-Bot to watch for junk I might accidentally kick while walking—didn't want to send a discarded lubricant can clanging across the

floor. As I crept along the wall, I stopped by one of the windows to peek out through the slats.

I could clearly see Chet standing outside the other hangar, surrounded by the guard and mechanics. He spoke animatedly while carefully holding up a reality ash in one hand.

“Spensa,” M-Bot whispered. “It doesn’t seem like he’s betraying us.”

It didn’t. But, well, that was why I’d continued with the plan. If I really *was* just being paranoid, then I could still steal a ship, break out, and turn guns on the pirates while Chet joined me. I’d tell him I’d been spooked at the last minute and had decided to sneak into a building where everyone was asleep.

I turned from the window to survey the four fighters. Two were obviously civilian ships augmented with some makeshift destructors that marred the otherwise intentional designs. Fortunately the two others were military, with built-in weapons. I picked the interceptor—a lean, dangerous-looking variety of ship that balanced speed and offensive capabilities. It also felt the most familiar, similar to DDF ships from Detritus, with a long thin arrow shape.

I hurried over and grabbed the wing, then hauled myself up to the canopy. I was acquainted at this point with several different control schemes. I’d have to hope that I knew this one’s. If not, I’d inspect the other ships. Stars, I hoped I didn’t have to end up stealing that shuttlecraft in the corner. Piloting that would be like riding a potbellied pig into battle among a group of knights.

I peered into the cockpit of the ship and it was dark and shadowed, so I couldn’t identify the control scheme from outside. I felt along the rim and found an access port for M-Bot—most ships had external ones for diagnostics. I plugged in his drone to let him interface—which would theoretically allow him to open the cockpit and override the pilot lockouts.

“Ah...” M-Bot said. “This will be easy. Hmm. Lots of hard drive space in here. It might feel nice to be in a larger ship again. First though, let’s see... Should be through in thirty seconds or so.”

I nodded, leaning down and staring into the cockpit. That was a control sphere, wasn't it? Yeah, the layout did *seem* familiar. The seat was strange and lumpy though. Like instead of being a chair, it was some other seating mechanism?

Thinking about that started me worrying about the kitsen, who had their own strange way of building starships. They'd helped me at the battle against Starsight. What would Winzik do to them? They were leaderless now that Hesho was dead, sucked out into the vacuum of space when Brade attacked their ship.

The kitsen had trusted me. Had I doomed their entire planet? What happened if Winzik actually persuaded the delvers to help him? I *needed* to find some way to stop them, so—

“Huh,” M-Bot said.

“What?” I hissed.

“I just got locked out of a few systems,” he said. “I can reroute, but... That's odd. The lockout was via a manual override. How would...”

Lights went on in the cockpit, illuminating a creature that had been *sleeping* inside. The light reflected off a body that I had trouble sorting out—crystalline limbs and a bulky shape like a pile of glistening stone...

“Oh, scud,” I whispered.

No heat signatures. But not all life was warm. I *knew* that. Figments like Vapor seemed not to even have *bodies*. I'd made a terrible miscalculation. My sole consolation was that M-Bot had done the same.

“M-Bot!” I said. “Run!”

I leaped off the wing and hit the ground hard, stumbling as a loud alarm started blaring. I made it halfway to the door before a voice sounded over some speakers.

“Keep running, and I *will* vaporize you,” it said—my translator pin happily supplying the words in English. I froze, then looked back at the ship to find one of the wing-mounted destructors on a turret pointing right at me.

I raised my hands, struggling to catch my breath and fighting down my instinct to run. Looked like I was going to get another chance at being a pirate captive. And this time it was entirely my own fault.



# 17

The pirates thumped me down in a seat and one of them lashed my hands behind me. A large group of them had gathered in the hangar, which was now flooded with light.

I saw only one human among them, the fellow I'd noticed earlier. Most of the rest were diones, though there were also several of those bird people and one varvax—the alien species I'd known as the Krell, small crablike creatures that moved around in large blocky exoskeleton suits built from something like sandstone.

The group parted to make way for an alien of a completely different race, with a wide face and powerful limbs. Long teeth and clawed fingers gave this one the overall appearance of something like a bear on its hind legs, except not furry. They walked with a hunched-forward gait, giving them a predatory air, beefy arms held forward and at the ready.

I took this one for the leader of the group, considering the fine jacket and impressive hat, complete with a large plume. “Words!” the creature said. “Trying to steal a starfighter, eh? You must have grown at least six *muluns* for trying that!”

My pin didn't translate the word, which was odd. I sat there, my hands bound behind me, and tried to come up with a plan. The leader alien walked up and slapped me on the back in a way that felt distinctly friendly.

“But you have rotten luck,” the leader continued. “Not a single *gulun* for you! Picking a ship inhabited by one of our resonants? Words, girl. *Words*. Anyway, welcome to the Broadsiders.”

“Wait,” I said, twisting to look at the leader. “Welcome?”

“The more people we have around, the more stable our memories remain,” one of the diones explained. “So you’re lucky. No execution for you. Instead you get to be our new cleaning slave.”

Great. Well, as awful as being a slave sounded, I felt even worse for messing up the plan. Chet had been trustworthy all along, and here I’d bungled everything.

“There were some ashes on her, Captain,” the varvax noted in their language, holding up a glowing transparent bag.

The scruffy human stepped forward carrying M-Bot’s drone. “Ma’am? This is what she used to try to break into the starship.”

I felt a spike of alarm. *M-Bot*? The drone seemed completely lifeless. The human fiddled with it, then found the old power button—which M-Bot had disconnected. However, when the human pushed the button, the drone’s small acclivity rings powered on, turning from dull blue-black to a vibrant glowing azure. The drone began to hover on its own power. Then as the human let go, it hovered over to use its grabber arm to pick up a rag from the floor. It then began wiping a window with it.

*M-Bot, you genius*, I thought. He always *talked* about how intelligent he was, but considering how he acted a lot of the time, it was easy to forget. Right now though, he did a spot-on imitation of a cleaning drone.

“Huh,” the captain said, then nudged me—hard enough that my chair scooted along the floor. “How’d you make it hack the canopy on Shiver’s starfighter?”

“It has some illegal programs,” I muttered, trying to play the role of the mousy little rat-catcher girl. “I managed to install them before coming in here. Thought it would be smart to hide them in a normal cleaning drone.”

That would imply the drone didn’t have a proper AI, so theoretically the Broadsiders shouldn’t be afraid of it becoming self-aware. Though admittedly I didn’t know a ton about AIs.

“Is that so?” the captain said. “Words. That might be useful. I’ll consider it an apology gift from you for waking me up in the middle of the

night. Grow a *tulun* or two at my generosity, new slave. What's your name?"

"Spin," I said. "Yours?"

"Ha! *Muluns* indeed." She swept off her hat and inclined her head toward me, revealing a crest of yellow feathers like a mohawk. "I'm Peg, captain of the Broadsiders!"

"Peg?" I said, glancing at the captain's legs—both of which were whole. "As in..."

The human laughed. "Nah," he said to me in heavily accented English. "She doesn't get it. The name's a coincidence."

He walked over and shut off M-Bot, who dutifully powered down the rings and stopped moving. I twisted, trying to glance out the window to where Chet had been standing earlier, but couldn't make anything out.

"Your friend ran off," the human said to me, then patted the rifle over his shoulder. "Lucky for him, I was more worried about an attack than I was a scout. I only got a few shots off on him before ducking in to see what was happening."

"Your friend abandoned you," Peg said. "Should have given him some of your *muluns*."

That about proved it: Chet hadn't sold me out. He'd run, yes, but that was smart.

Scud, I felt like a complete idiot. Maybe after being betrayed by Brade, I was overly sensitive. Or maybe I was just a terrible judge of people.

Yeah...it was probably that. I had to face it, didn't I? I'd spent most of my training assuming Jorgen was a legitimate jerk, while he was actually pretty un-jerky. But I'd tried hard to trust Brade despite the way she acted. I heaved a sigh and tipped my head back to stare at the ceiling.

I only wanted to fly again. I'd trained all my life to be a warrior. That was what I *knew*, what I *understood*. How did I keep ending up in situations like this instead?

"Hey," Peg said, shoving me on the shoulder, "don't get like that. You might not realize it, but you're far better off scrubbing our floors than you would be out there on your own."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Keep her on a leash,” Peg said, striding away. “And don’t let her near that drone, just in case. I’m gonna go back to sleep.”

# 18

“Leash,” it turned out, meant a light-line.

I’d never seen one used this way. A loop on one end was fastened around my neck, the other end attached to the wall. The control mechanism was locked tight, leaving me stuck. I’d sooner chew through iron links with my teeth than find a way to slice a light-line.

Though the pirates had joked about making me clean floors, they actually pulled over a box of parts for me, along with several containers of lubricant. They told me to grease each part and set them out on a cloth.

This was good. They *could* have left me to feel sorry for myself—and there’s no telling how long I would have indulged that. But when they plopped down the gears and made fun of me for getting caught, demanding I work...well, that made me angry. And anger considers defeatism to be easy prey.

I did as they asked, but as soon as I’d gathered my wits and my determination, I quested out with my cytonic senses, searching for Chet. I found his mind relatively nearby; I thought maybe he’d made his way back onto the blue jungle fragment to hide, if it hadn’t drifted away already.

*Chet?* I said to his mind.

*Ah*, he said, his “voice” laced with pain. *Miss Nightshade. It is good to hear that you are well. I had feared the worst!*

*You’re hurt!* I said.

*Merely a...small wound*, he said. *A destructor shot grazed me. Nothing an old hound like me hasn’t felt a dozen times over! Ha...*

It was bravado. I could feel he was legitimately in pain. And it was my fault.

*Be careful,* he warned me. *Talking this way could draw delver attention!*

That gave me pause. He was right. Yet I had an impression... Ever since that moment at the Path, something had changed about my powers, or my understanding of them. I knew better how to hide.

I closed my eyes and concentrated. When I reached out to someone like Chet, I could now see that I always did the cytonic equivalent of shouting. So I tried to focus, control my voice. I returned to Chet and brushed his mind with a soft whisper instead.

*How is this?*

*Miss Nightshade!* he said. *Why, that is marvelous. How did you learn to be so quiet?*

*I'm learning just now,* I said. But then, I'd always had a talent for hearing the stars—and the night before, I'd been able to catch thoughts Brade hadn't wanted to share with me. *I think maybe you don't need to project your thoughts to me. Just think them while we're connected, and I will overhear them.*

*Does this work?* he asked, plainly trying to do as I asked.

*It does,* I said.

*Excellent! What is your situation, then?*

*Captured,* I said. *Chained to the wall and greasing some parts for starship repair.*

*Could be worse,* Chet said. *What is the plan?*

*I haven't really gotten that far.*

*Fair enough!* Chet said. *But this need only be a minor setback. In fact, it could be for the best! We must find a way to visit the next location on the Path of Elders, which is deep within Broadsider territory. I had worried about them hunting us down once we stole a ship. It would be difficult to find time to indulge in a vision while under fire.*

*But with you infiltrating their base, perhaps we can find a way to prevent that. Could you see if you can learn how they patrol their territory?*

There was a certain forced boisterousness to his words. Connected to him as I was now, I could see that more clearly than ever. He wasn't simply a bundle of endless optimism; he chose to speak this way deliberately.

*You are in pain, I said to him. I'm worried about you.*

*Don't be. Just focus on getting us a ship. Ha! Those pirates have no idea what they've done by bringing you in among them, I must say.*

I found myself smiling. And...well, he did have a point. *I could* use this. Being captured by pirates was exactly the kind of awesome thing that happened in the stories; it was merely another interesting challenge to overcome. Plus, I was inadvertently being given a chance to practice my cytonic skills.

Except I couldn't gloss over how my mistake had landed us in this situation. I had to come clean.

*Chet, I said. I'm sorry. I messed all of this up.*

*You mustn't blame yourself, Miss Nightshade, he replied. Sometimes plans don't work out.*

*Except, I said, it was because of me. I...changed the plan at the last minute, sneaking into a different hangar than we'd discussed.*

*Why would you do that?* he asked.

*Because...I didn't trust you, Chet. I thought you were going to betray me and steal my icon.*

I felt the *immediate* stab of pain those words caused him.

*You...did?* Chet said.

*I'm sorry, I said. I...well, I let my worries get the better of me.*

Scud, it hurt worse, feeling firsthand his sense of betrayal. *Why?* he asked. *Have I not endeavored to aid you in your entire quest? Have I not been a worthy traveling companion?*

*You have!* I said. *I just... I'm sorry, Chet. This is my problem, not yours.*

*I see, he sent back. Yes, um. Well, we must move forward! Let the past be the past, one might say. Um. Yes...*

Never had words sounded more forced to me. I could feel his anguish; being trusted was important to him, for reasons I couldn't sort through—I could only feel what was on the surface, not his deeper thoughts.

*Well, Chet said. I will recuperate here, I think. You soldier forward! Yes.*

I wanted to apologize again. I wanted to explain the way I was hurt by Brade's betrayal—and the way I was realizing how bad I was at judging people. But he wanted to be left alone. I could feel that. I had to allow him that.

I broke off the connection, feeling sick and worthless. Scud. So I threw myself into greasing the parts and kept an eye on the pirates, distracting myself from my shame by trying to learn what I could about them.

Over the next few hours, I got a glimpse of what it took to keep a flight of starfighters in the air without a proper support infrastructure. Judging from the way they talked, they spent an incredible amount of time maintaining the spacecraft—and figuring out how to make replacement parts out of salvage.

I'd thought our settlement on Detritus had been ragtag, but we'd had the forges and manufactories. We'd had tens of thousands of people, and our entire society had been devoted to keeping a few hundred starfighters in combat. The Broadsiders didn't have any of that. From what I could tell, they were under twenty in number, and flew nine starfighters.

By the time I was halfway through the stack of parts, I had recovered some self-respect and was focused on the problem at hand. Yes, I'd made a mistake. Yes, I'd hurt Chet. I needed to keep pressing forward, however. The best way to make it up to him was to steal a ship, then get us through Broadsider territory to the next stop on the Path of Elders.

Right. First step: try to learn what I could of these pirates. This was an opportunity as much as it was a setback. I turned my attention to the rest of the parts, and soon reached the last of them—a large gear. I set it onto the cloth with a clink.

"Hey," I called to the pirates, "I'm finished."

The human with the scraggly beard walked over, joined by the varvax. I kept extra close attention on *that* one. They were the race who had kept my people enslaved, and I couldn't trust them.

"I could use some more work," I said to them. "What do you want me to do next?"



“You *want* more work?” the human asked.

“Better than sitting around feeling sorry for myself,” I said.

After a shared look with the varvax, the human dragged over one of the landing gear assemblies, with the wheel still attached. “You know how to strip this and relubricate it?”

I nodded, fishing in the tool bin the varvax had provided. I wasn’t an expert in repairs or engineering—Rig had always been the one who knew that kind of stuff—but he’d taught me how to service M-Bot’s original ship during our days rebuilding it. I could handle breaking down a landing gear assembly.

The varvax returned to her work, but as the human turned away, I asked, “So what’s your story?”

He paused, then squatted beside me, watching as I somewhat inexpertly disassembled the mechanism. Was he judging me for using the wrong socket wrench *three* separate times?

“I’m not that interesting,” he finally said. “But I’ve got the same question for you. How do you know how to do this? Your master really let you play with machinery?”

“My master?”

“You said you were a thief,” he said. “But before you escaped you were a pet, right? Like me? A kept human? Or...no, were you in one of the research labs?”

Ahh...right. He must have been a human like Brade—some were kept as novelties around the Superiority. Like kings had kept lions back on Old Earth. Fearsome creatures from another world, turned into showpieces. I could imagine the “civilized” peoples of the Superiority being delighted by the dangerous humans who had once tried to conquer the galaxy.

“I’m surprised they put you in here,” I said. “You must have been quite valuable as a curiosity.”

“Yeah, well,” he said. “It’s all fun and games until your pet tries to steal the family starship and escape. Too aggressive, they decided. As if they hadn’t known what I was when they bought me.” He held out a hand. “I’m Maksim.”

“Spin,” I replied, taking it.

“Don’t feel too bad about being locked up,” he said, gesturing to the light-line. “The Broadsiders are a good group. Show the captain you’re not going to run the first chance you get, and you can work your way up like the rest of us. Hell, if you’re as good with repairs as you seem, you’ll be in charge of a ground crew before too long.”

I looked at the mediocre work I’d been doing on the wheel housing. This was what passed for being good with repairs around here?

“What if I never get to where I won’t run?” I asked.

He studied me. “You’re new in the nowhere, aren’t you? That other guy, your friend, he had a sense about him. Like he knew what he was doing. Not you though, eh?”

“I’ve only been in for...” I tried to remember. “For...” Scud. Why was that so hard to remember? “A week? I think?”

“Best not to stress about the time too much,” Maksim said. “Even in a group, it’s difficult for us to keep track. I’m surprised you lasted as well as you did out there.” He patted me on the shoulder, then stood up. “That’s why you won’t run. You’ll feel better here. More like yourself. You’ll see.”

He didn’t seem to even consider it a possibility that I’d been carrying a reality icon, despite the ashes they’d found. Icons must really have been as rare as Chet said.

Well, a plan of attack was forming. I could earn the trust of the pirates by working here a few days, all while learning how they patrolled their territory, like Chet suggested. I could also investigate the flight mechanisms for the various ships and pick out the easiest one to steal.

Then, as soon as I felt the time was right, I could grab M-Bot, steal a ship, dig out the icon, and be on my way. Maybe with all that done, Chet would forgive me for being a complete jerkface.

“Where did you learn mechanics so well?” Maksim asked. “And why would they throw you in here? If you’re this talented?”

“I’m not as talented as you think.”

He smiled. “I know it’s sometimes hard to open up. But if you tell us about your old life, we can remind you about it. If you forget.”

“Scud. That happens?” I said, making small talk. My mind was more focused on planning my escape than on what I was saying.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” he said. “Especially if you have friends to help you remember.”

“Well, I wasn’t thrown in here,” I said, turning back to the wheel mechanism. “I jumped in myself. Though admittedly, I *was* being chased by a bunch of soldiers at the time.”

“Ha!” Maksim said. “They really should learn not to keep us as pets.”

I almost told him I wasn’t a pet. That I was from a human planetary enclave. He was so friendly, I wanted to trust him and explain that I was a soldier fighting the Superiority.

Yeah, that would be a *bad* idea if I wanted to steal a ship. Fortunately, I was slowly learning my lesson. Best not to tip off a captor to what I was planning. Of course, what if I was making a mistake by *not* trusting him? I’d been too suspicious of Chet. But not being suspicious *enough* of Brade had landed me in enormous trouble.

Man, I was *crap* at judging people, wasn’t I?

At any rate, the best option seemed to be to remain quiet about my skills. Maksim left me and went over to chat with his varvax friend, gesturing toward me periodically. The speed at which I did my work seemed to make them suspicious, and I realized that maybe I should have pretended to be more ignorant.

Regardless, I needed to contact M-Bot. So I decided to mutter and talk to myself a lot as I worked. It felt like a good idea to demonstrate to the others that I was constantly chattering, even when nobody was around. That way, when I eventually talked to M-Bot’s drone, it wouldn’t look so odd.

I kept stripping and lubricating the mechanism—trying to slow down—for what had to have been another few hours. Until eventually I felt a mind hesitantly pushing against mine.

*Chet?* I asked.

*Indeed,* he replied. *I would like to speak with you. But perhaps we should do it the quieter way you did before...*

*Done,* I said. *But Chet, I—*

*Please, he said. If I might begin?*

*Go ahead, I said, forcing myself to hold back another apology.*

*I have been thinking a great deal about our earlier conversation, he said. And I wanted to admit something to you. Your suspicion of me isn't entirely unfounded. I have been...disingenuous, Miss Nightshade.*

*In...what way? I asked.*

*I am not everything I appear to be, he said. It is difficult for me to admit, for me to explain. You see, I've told you I don't remember being Commander Spears—but it's worse than that. I...have been in here so long that I've lost much of my identity. Not only memories, but personality as well. Everything I was...crumbled away, like dirt before a persistent stream.*

*As this happened, I grew frightened. It is a terrible thing to lose yourself, and I had to replace it with something. And I remembered stories. Fanciful stories perhaps, but full of men I'd admired. Allan Quatermain, Lord John Roxton, Chet Cannister. As I lost myself, I...I filled in the gaps, you see. The line between the hero adventurer and me blurred.*

*And so, you are right to be suspicious. You perhaps thought me a liar, and in a way I am. Because I could not show you my true self. I've forgotten him.*

*Chet, I said. That doesn't make you a liar.*

*Perhaps not, he replied. But the truth is...difficult to bear. I am not really a man, Miss Nightshade. I'm a collection of stories stuffed into a brain with no context, trying so very hard to simply keep going.*

*You're a hero, I said.*

*If that were true, he replied, then I'd have confronted the truths in the Path of Elders long ago. They...frighten me, Miss Nightshade...Spensa, they frighten me. For reasons I can't explain, because I don't quite remember. I think part of me is hidden in them somewhere, something that terrifies me. If I were a true hero, I would have walked that road on my own long ago.*

*I didn't know what to make of that. I could feel his sincerity, and his fear. Even his confusion.*

*It doesn't matter where it came from, I said firmly. You rescued me, guided me, helped me. And now you're walking this Path with me.*

*All for a fee, he said. You...noticed how I look upon your icon. I see now why you...treated me as you did.*

I felt another spike of shame. Mirrored by his own.

*We are quite a pair, aren't we? he sent. I hope that being near an icon will help me become more...solid. That the reality ashes, and the tie back to the somewhere, will help me somehow. I cannot entirely blame you for worrying about my intentions.*

*My distrust hurt you though, I said. Still hurts you.*

*Yes, he admitted. It's in the persona, you understand. I...I must see myself as a hero, the gentleman explorer, beloved and trusted. Because if I'm not that, well... Well then... That is all I have left of what I once was. Those dreams, those aspirations.*

It was a strikingly candid moment, where I could feel him exposed, frightened. Scud. I didn't deserve his confession, but in that moment I knew I could trust him. The face he showed might have been a patchwork creation of his memories of stories, but the heart inside...that was good. Solid.

I tried to project this to him, and it worked. He perked up, and in a moment of wordless communication, he accepted my apology. We would continue forward, we would walk the Path of Elders, and we would find the secrets.

I broke off the communication, then aggressively attacked the last of my work on the landing gear. I probably should have been tired, but I wasn't—nor was I thirsty. In fact, I had no idea how long I'd been working. I couldn't use my fatigue, or even hunger, as a way to judge the passage of time. In here, I often felt like I could just keep going. Forever.

That was dangerous. I was going to have to keep a close eye on myself.

# 19

A few days later, I felt I was finally getting a handle on the Broadsiders as a group.

“Yeah, there are six pirate factions,” Maksim had explained as we went through some booster maintenance on my second day as a captive. “We Broadsiders are smaller than we used to be, but we’re one of the first and most proud.”

“And the Superiority?” I’d asked. “Several of these starfighters are their models.”

“Ha! Yeah. The poor drips that run the mining operation at Surehold ask for ships to protect themselves from us. Which gives us plenty of opportunities to steal them!”

Over the next two days, I subtly picked out more information. The factions had been disorganized until a few years ago—more very small roving bands, or straggling refugees. The organization into factions had come as they solidified into the current six.

They spent most of their time trying to steal from the mining base, capturing new people who were exiled, or even raiding one another. Over the days as I watched, the Broadsiders curiously didn’t lose a single one of their nine ships in battle, though they went on a couple of raids. So maybe these were quick encounters, more about posturing than actual fighting.

Of all the Broadsiders, I found Peg the most interesting. There was something...different about the large alien. She was a tenasi, a race that I’d learned—on Starsight—was often used to pilot drones or do other fighting

in the Superiority. She certainly had a dominating presence, and she watched me carefully whenever she was near.

Other than her, four people commonly worked in our hangar. Maksim was one. The hangar I'd broken into had actually been his, though he'd been spending his guard duty hanging out with another flight. His flight was named Cutlass Flight—again, borrowing Old Earth terms because the pirates found them intimidating. I had essentially been assigned to this flight myself, as I was under their supervision.

The varvax in our flight was named Nuluba, a female of their species. She still made me nervous—I couldn't look at her without seeing Winzik, as her exoskeleton was the same color green. Together she and Maksim made up the ground crew for Cutlass Flight, which currently had only two active starfighters, plus Peg's shuttle—which she was very proud of, but which I wouldn't want to fight in.

There was also one ship that wasn't combat ready yet: an old civilian vessel the team was modifying to be battleworthy. It, like the shuttle, had a light-lance for towing; though the Superiority didn't commonly use those for battle, they had them for industrial purposes. Now the team was installing destructors. As I did reconnaissance over the next few days, I decided that was the ship I was going to have to steal. Peg's shuttle had an unfamiliar control scheme, and the two more combat-ready ships...

Well, they were occupied by Cutlass Flight's two starfighter pilots. Both were of a crystalline species who literally inhabited their ships. As I was asking about their battle skill, Maksim dropped a really important piece of intel.

"It *is* nice to have two pilots who live in their cockpits," he said, wagging a wrench toward the ships. "As soon as the scanner tells us a raid is coming, they're ready."

Scanner?

The Broadsiders had a long-range scanner?

I'd assumed they'd have smaller proximity sensors like on starfighters. But a full-blown, long-range piece of surveillance equipment? That came as a surprise.

I immediately started nosing about. The scanner's display was in our hangar, it turned out, and it was attached to some equipment up on the roof. It tracked ships and kept a detailed map of the region. Later that day, I managed to catch a look at the screen while the full map was up, showing me a more detailed version of what Chet had once drawn out for me.

The Broadsider territory was a wedge of the belt tapering inward, bordered by other pirate factions on either side. All of their territory ended at Superiority territory—a wide band that dominated the middle of the belt in this region.

Excited, I sent word to Chet that night.

*There's a scanner, I explained. A big one that watches for incoming ships. It can scan all the way to the Superiority's region of space, though I don't think it can spot individual people. It doesn't have enough resolution for that.*

*That's more than I thought they'd have, he said. They mostly scrounge for technology—I wonder where they acquired a high-powered scanner.*

*No idea, I said. But it's a good thing I got captured, because...*

*Because with that scanner, they'd be able to track any ship we stole all the way to the next step in the Path, Chet said. Scrud. We'd never have managed to investigate the portal. They'd have been able to chase us all over the region. I am glad we found this out—though if offered the chance, I'd have chosen a route to this information that didn't involve my shoulder being baked like brisket...*

He'd been spending the days “convalescing,” by his terms. I still felt bad about the destructor shot.

*Anyway, I said, this gives us an opportunity. I will need to sabotage that scanner before I go.*

*Ha! Don't enjoy yourself too much, Spensa. You'll make me feel left out! What is the next step in our plan, then?*

I turned over in my bed—a mattress and blanket in the hangar, where I was tethered to the wall. They'd been giving me more slack lately on that, but I was still locked into place for now.



*Next step, I said, is to contact M-Bot. I'll need to upload him to steal the ship.*

*Excellent, Chet said. Give my best to the abom—to the AI.*

*I appreciate you trying to think of him that way.*

*If I have been misjudged, Chet said, then I too may misjudge. I don't think it wise to keep an AI near, but that is a gut instinctual reaction. I should instead accept your word on his character. Perhaps if I'd done that sooner, I would not have given you cause to mistrust me.*

I winced, like I always did when Chet felt pain during our communications. *Regardless, I said, I have a plan for contacting M-Bot. I just need to find a starship part that's in bad disrepair...*

Once our conversation was done, I began to drift off to sleep—then stopped myself before fully going out. I tried to contact Jorgen, but something prevented me. A kind of odd mist hovered around me, blocking my attempts. I wasn't certain what to make of it, yet...I'd seen this on other nights recently, hadn't I?

The next morning, Maksim clapped his hands and ceremoniously unhooked my light-line, then turned it off. "You've earned a little more slack. Peg's orders." He leaned in. "Don't hang yourself, if you can help it."

I felt at my neck. My natural instinct was to bolt. I fought that down. "Thanks," I said, standing up and stretching. Only four—no, it had been five, hadn't it?—days with the Broadsiders, and I had already gained this much trust? This was going *great*.

"We've got some gears to grease," Maksim said.

"No more gears, please," I replied. "I feel the need to make myself extra useful, to prove myself to Peg. Tell me, what's the most broken-est thing you have in here?"

"Don't know about that," Maksim said, but gestured toward one of the fighter ships. "But Shiver's left destructor has been acting up. If you could somehow fix it..."

I nodded and went to check in with Nuluba, who had an office area at the rear of the hangar. She authorized all work, and soon I found myself under the wing of the starfighter, prodding at the defective destructor. Black

gunk was leaking out of one of the seams, and the entire thing smelled terrible.

“Uh,” I said, “how long since you’ve serviced this thing?”

A large blue crystal, shaped like a prism, sat on a stool beside me. A crust of smaller crystals held it in place, and a line of the same crystals ran across the floor and up the wheel and side of the starfighter into the cockpit.

The larger crystal nearest me vibrated with a reverberating tone. I would never have recognized it as a language; it sounded one step away from the noise an engine made when close to locking up. But my pin knew better than I did, and translated the peals into words.

“It has been months,” the crystal admitted. “Maybe longer. Time is so hard to track in here...”

“Months or more?” I said, incredulous. “Destructors should be serviced every *week*.”

“We thought it unwise to open the housing, considering the damage to it,” the crystal said. “We thought it might break and not be fixable.”

“Prevention is always better than repair,” I said.

“Wise words,” the crystal replied, “but accurate only as long as you have access to preventive measures.”

The crystal was an alien creature known as a resonant. This one, whose name in English was Shiver, had told me she was female “this time.” Their entire bodies were made of crystal that could grow at will. She’d filled the inside of the starfighter cockpit much as minerals fill a geode.

The part I was talking to now—the larger gemstone—had grown rapidly as I’d come over to inspect the machine. I imagined this part was like an arm or something—a “limb” Shiver could extend for interaction. The large crystal at the end didn’t seem necessary; I had the sense she created it to give others something to address when speaking to her.

My attempt to steal a ship had been doomed from the start; I’d chosen a vehicle where the electronics and controls were grown over by Shiver’s body. Normally, a resonant would remain in one place for an entire “incarnation,” which I gathered lasted some fifty years or so. This time she

had grown herself through the starship, almost coming to inhabit it as an AI might. Or actually, like a figment.

“Hey, Shiver,” I said as I unscrewed the housing on the destructor to get a look at the guts, “you ever heard of a species known as figments?”

“Indeed I have,” Shiver said. “Such strange and mysterious individuals. I’ve never met one, but I’ve always been fascinated by them.”

“I was thinking they’re kind of like your species,” I said.

“In what way?”

“Well, you both kind of *inhabit* a spaceship. Like...I don’t know, a soul in a body.”

“That’s a fascinating perspective.”

The way those words sounded made me think of how Kimmalyne would reply “bless your stars” to some stupid comment I’d made.

“I feel like you disagree with me,” I said.

“Though I find some holes in your logic, I’m certain I’ll understand better after considering your opinion.”

I’d nearly forgotten how conciliatory people from the Superiority could be. Here was a literal group of pirates that had caught me trying to steal from them, and they had treated me almost like a houseguest. A chained-up one, but still.

“You can tell me if I said something dumb,” I said as I worked on the housing screws. “I’m not going to be offended.”

“It’s not really our way...”

“You’re a starfighter pilot,” I said. “You fly out there weekly to fight. You can’t argue with me a little?”

“Spin, my species evolved as motionless individuals who would spend decades next to one another. It’s not in our nature to argue. Unlike motile species, we cannot simply walk away if we make one another angry.”

Huh. Yeah, that made sense.

“But,” Shiver said, “in the name of broadening both of our understandings, let me explain. You imply that I am like a figment by the way we both control a ship. I find this a superficial observation, as it makes us similar in the same way any two species who use appendages to move

controls would be similar—no matter how different their cultures, bodies, and core chemical makeups might be.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I said. “Honestly, I might just be missing my friends.”

“I can understand,” Shiver said. “I also miss my seven mates from my cavern. I grew to be part of them for three incarnations, and now...”

I doubted a crystalline creature could cry. But the peal that came next was reminiscent of it, and the pin didn’t interpret the sounds as words.

“Hey,” I said, finally getting the last stubborn screw out. “We’ll find a way out of here someday.”

“Of course we will,” Shiver said. “Of course we will.”

Those words also had the same feel of something Kimmalyn would say. The two would get along fantastically. At least, both seemed pretty good at handling me.

I pried off the destructor’s outer housing, then wrinkled my nose. The weapon clearly had a leak in its mechanisms—fluid had been seeping out for some time. Then firing the weapon had heated it up and charred it all, resulting in a heavily corroded mechanism full of flaky black ash.

*This is perfect*, I thought, careful not to show my excitement. I’d wanted something broken, but something that was broken *and* needed cleaning was even better.

Out loud I said, “Scud. This is a mess.”

“I resonate that,” Shiver said. “And felt it might be so.”

“This is going to take a while to clean up,” I said. “I’ll pull it off the ship for now, so you’ll be missing a destructor if you have to fly.”

“Unfortunately, the nature of our existence often requires flying in suboptimal conditions,” Shiver said. “I wish you speed and self-fulfillment as you work on your repairs, Spin.”

“Thanks,” I said. I affixed a small portable acclivity ring to the bottom of the mechanism, then began unhooking it from the wing. That took about a half hour, but once I was done, I lowered it with a remote control.

The destructor was a good meter and a half long, shaped kind of like a missile—and with the housing removed, it was all exposed wires and char.

As I hovered it along, I got a glimpse out the back door—and it took extreme self-control to not immediately run out and dig up my father’s pin. I knew it would be safe out there though. Much safer than in my possession.

I hovered the unmounted destructor over to Nuluba’s desk, where she was cataloging salvage. The varvax liked to keep track of things like that, which I found suspicious. Who became a pirate to do *paperwork*?

“It’s not looking good for this, Nuluba,” I said, gesturing to the destructor. “I won’t even be able to tell how much is fixable until after I’ve cleaned it off—and that alone could take weeks of effort.”

“My, my,” Nuluba said, standing from her desk and inspecting the destructor. Like others of her kind, she made wide gestures with the hands of her suit as she spoke, the sound being projected out through the sides of the exoskeleton’s head. “We don’t have a replacement—I already have four other faulty destructors. Spin the captive, there’s no way you could speed up this repair?”

“You’re kidding, right?” I said, gesturing to the destructor.

Nuluba sighed.

“I suppose,” I said, pretending to think about it, “my old cleaning bot could work faster. Don’t know where you put it though.” As soon as I said it, I found the attempt awkward. The varvax were such a crafty species; surely Nuluba would immediately see through what I was doing.

“Oh!” she said. “That’s a good idea. Here, let me get it for you.”

I felt an immediate spike of alarm. That had been too easy, hadn’t it? Yet the varvax wandered off, then less than a minute later returned to the hangar, M-Bot’s drone floating alongside her. I cautiously guided the destructor over to a workbench near the corner. Nuluba left the drone with me and returned to her work as if nothing unusual were happening.

However, as I looked M-Bot over, I was pretty sure I caught Nuluba watching me. So...this was a test of some sort, maybe? That made sense. The Broadsiders had probably been expecting me to ask to use the drone. Still, it seemed odd they’d allow it after such a short time of us working together.

Maybe they'd placed a bug of some sort on him. Would trying to talk to him alert them?

*They don't think he's an AI, I reminded myself. They think he's just some kind of spy bot.*

Regardless, I had to take the chance. I knelt and opened the side of the drone where the controls were and acted like I was engaging some programs. Then I whispered, "Hey."

"You should know," he whispered back, "they've installed some very basic monitoring software on me."

"That's actually a relief," I whispered. "I worried it was too easy to get them to let me work with you. I assume you can deal with the software?"

"Obviously," he said. "I'm trying not to be *too* offended by the AI scrubbing they tried to do. It's basically the equivalent of feeding me poison. Fortunately, in this case that 'feeding' involved a comically large spoon and a big sign that said 'not poison.' I was able to circumvent it with ease, but—as one might say—it's the thought that counts."

"Right, then," I said. "I need you to make it appear as though I used a code to access some of your hidden programming, then spoof it so they think I set you to monitor and record what is said nearby. That will give them something to find that isn't *too* suspicious. After that, make it seem like I activated your deep cleaning and repair protocol."

"Great," he said. "Um, what deep cleaning and repair protocol?"

"The drone's original... Oh. We deleted that, didn't we?"

"What you didn't delete, I did when uploading myself," M-Bot whispered. "I wasn't about to keep cleaning protocols when I barely had room for myself, my mushroom databases, my backup mushroom databases, and my backups to the backups."

"Well, start pretending to clean alongside me and at least spoof the existence of some cleaning programs. I told them it would take weeks to fix this destructor without your help, but I honestly have no idea. I was just looking for an excuse."

He complied, and the two of us set to work. Fortunately, he quickly identified the burned compound and suggested a specific kind of solvent for

cleaning it. Even though he didn't have his cleaning routines, his chemistry database proved extremely helpful. Which was good, since the truth was that I had no idea how to repair a broken destructor. That went far beyond the basic maintenance Rig had taught me.

I kept us to the corner and chattered away—mostly talking to myself, keeping up my act. When nobody else was close, M-Bot could respond. He did have in his databases plenty of detailed starship schematics. So as we removed more of the black gunk, he could point out the problems with the machine. The multiple serious problems.

"I feel like I should be offended by proxy for this gun," M-Bot said. "Continuing to fire this was the machine equivalent of...um..."

"Of forcing your poor warhorse to keep galloping after it has thrown a shoe and taken an arrow in the flank?" I asked.

"Good metaphor," he said.

"Thanks," I said. I was lying on the ground, delicately trying to get some of the gunk off without ripping out a set of coolant hoses. "It's really good to hear your voice, M-Bot. Sorry I got us captured."

"Well, I did find some interesting molds in the other hangar. They're basically diet mushrooms, so that part was pleasant. What happened to Chet?"

"Got wounded," I said, "but escaped. I can talk to him with cytonics. He's recovering, and will be glad to hear that you and I have made contact."

"Are you certain?" he said. "He still thinks I'm an abomination."

"He's getting better about that."

"Maybe he shouldn't be," M-Bot said. He already kept his voice very soft when talking to me, but something seemed even more...hushed about this question. "The way the pirates checked to make sure there wasn't an AI in me—going so far as to inject scrubbing software—indicates Chet might be right. What if I *am* an abomination?"

"People think humans are abominations too," I said, getting a big chunk of the gunk free. "They consider that as verifiable as military protocol or personnel records. But it's flat-out wrong."

"The rumors about AIs must have started somewhere."

“Sure,” I said. “Like the rumors about humans. I mean, we apparently tried to conquer the galaxy *three times*. Doesn’t mean we’re monsters. Just inefficient tyrants.”

It was growing increasingly difficult to reconcile what my ancestors had done with the stories Gran-Gran told me. It was easy to think of yourself as the hero when you were fighting back against a vengeful enemy bent on extermination. But what about when you were the ones conquering? How many people like Morriumur—ordinary diones trying to prove themselves—had died in the wars my people had started?

It made me uncomfortable. I quoted Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan because when faced with annihilation, we needed that kind of courage. Yet both of those men—confirmed by M-Bot’s databases—had been mass murderers on a terrible scale.

My life had been so much simpler when I’d been fighting the nebulous “Krell” and not real people.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said, hovering in close. “Thank you. For continuing to be my friend. Despite the potential danger.”

“Thank you in return,” I said. “I mean, think about it realistically. If one of the two of *us* is going to end up being responsible for the other’s death, who’s it going to be? The fiddly little robot who loves mushrooms? Or the meter-and-a-half-tall terror who once tried to get her best friend to agree to be scalped so she could put her first notch on her toy hatchet?”

“Oh dear,” M-Bot said.

“In my defense,” I said, “Gran-Gran didn’t explain well, so I thought scalping someone meant cutting their hair real short, but while using a sword or an axe. It sounded pretty cool.”

M-Bot fell silent as Nuluba came walking by with a tablet, tapping away. I muttered to myself, talking as if to the black gunk while M-Bot sprayed solvent.

Eventually he spoke again, very quietly. “Spensa, something is odd about this destructor.”

“Other than the fact that it seems to have been fossilized in a tar pit?”



“Other than that, yes. Those two boxes installed on the sides of the weapon? They’re output modifiers. Normally you’d use something like that to increase the heat of a weapon for, say, cutting through metal shielding. Or maybe to modify it to lower shot intensity for training.”

“And what do these do?”

“There’s no way to tell,” M-Bot said. “They’ve been completely fried by the overuse. But haven’t you noticed how the Broadsiders have never lost a ship?”

“I’ve noticed,” I said. “But maybe the Broadsiders are just lucky. They’ve only been out on a couple of sorties since we arrived here.”

“I suppose that’s true... Huh.”

“What?” I asked.

“I just counted the number of sorties I’ve observed. I came up with ten.”

“Impossible,” I said. “Ten fights in four or five days?”

“Yeah, strange... Oh.”

“...Oh?”

“I just reconciled my internal chronometer,” he said. “We’ve been with the Broadsiders for nearly *two weeks*, Spensa.”

My cleaning rag dropped from my fingers. I blinked, trying to remember... How many times had I slept? It kind of blurred together...

“Scud,” I said. “How did you not notice?”

“I have no idea,” he said, his voice small. “I guess I’m more alive than I thought, and am experiencing some of the same effects you are. Indeed, a lack of time awareness would seem to fit with what we know of delvers.”

Well, that would explain why the others trusted me with M-Bot “so soon.” It wasn’t soon.

Nevertheless, my brain struggled to make sense of it. With an effort that felt almost *painful*, I thought back over the repairs I’d done. Stripping down the landing gear on all four ships. Doing booster maintenance. Light wing repairs...

I immediately reached out to Chet.

*Have you contacted the AI?* he asked.

*Yes, but...Chet, how many days do you think I've been in here, captured?*

*Six? he guessed. I've been sleeping off my wound a lot though. So maybe seven or eight?*

*Fourteen, I said.*

He was silent for a moment. Then I felt the emotional equivalence of a sigh.

*It is dangerous to stay in one place long, he said. This happens, Spensa. I'm sorry.*

"Can you set alarms?" I asked M-Bot. "Calendar alerts? We should start aggressively acknowledging each day. See if we can remain more focused."

"Yes. Yes, that's a good idea..."

I sensed worry in his voice though. Even if Chet expected this sort of thing, I felt it *incredibly* strange that it affected M-Bot. I did remember sleeping, but found I couldn't count the times I'd done it. This place played havoc with my sense of time in such a way as to make it really difficult.

Two weeks? A lot could change in a war during that time. Were my friends all right? I needed to accelerate my plans for escaping. I had to find a way to upload M-Bot's mind into one of the starfighters. Preferably one *without* a crystalline alien occupying it.

# 20

“I’ll be honest,” Maksim said, lounging across the sawhorse, a wrench dangling from one finger. “I always thought something was wrong with me. I was taught about how mean and naturally angry humans were, yet I didn’t feel *any* of that, you know?”

“Well, my owners presumed their training kept me under control. They had this whole therapy process they said ‘cured’ aggression, and so were able to get the permits for a human child. They got me when I was nine, and had me sit around and hum.”

I looked up from my diagnostic screen, where I’d been quietly preparing to advance the next step of our plan. Peg had mentioned that the base scanner needed some maintenance. I wasn’t certain when that would happen, but I wanted to be ready to go when it did.

For the time being, I was doing my best to fit in. And I had to admit I enjoyed chatting with the others. “They had you hum? Like...you know...” I made a humming noise.

“Exactly,” Maksim said. “They’d have me sit on a little mat and just *hum*. For hours at a time. They said it was a special ‘proprietary process.’ I guess it was the tone I was humming that made it distinctive? Still not sure, honestly, though they had me at it for twenty years.”

“Anti-aggression therapy is big business, Spin,” Nuluba said from where she sat on the floor nearby, poring over some spreadsheets. “Many parents are terrified that their child might be too aggressive. They’ll pay big money for treatment. Any treatment.”

“It is a failing,” Shiver said, her crystal letting out peals from where it had grown on a box nearby. “Though the humming treatment sounds... unusual, there are more reasonable therapies available. I think many people in the Superiority are working hard to create a better society, but...some of us question if our goals are worthy. The entire system vibrates with an unsteady tone. It cracks itself with such sounds. We are...too polite sometimes to accept this.”

Maksim nodded. The beard made him look older than the early thirties he actually was. I’d always imagined that a long rugged beard would make a man seem like a warrior. Maksim disabused me of that image. He looked a lot less like a warrior than he did like a guy who’d been lost wandering the caverns.

His relaxed manner, though, made me curious. I’d assumed all captive humans would be intense like Brade. Yet this guy was so laid back, he could have gotten into a napping contest with...with someone I used to know...

With *Nedd*. That was it. How had I forgotten Nedd’s name? Maksim could have gotten into a napping contest with Nedd and held his own.

“I learned to act real fearsome,” Maksim said, grinning. “I’d growl, and show my teeth, and even wave my hands and say ‘Boingar boingar.’ I told them it was my clan’s battle cry. My parents would have found that funny. We didn’t have a clan. Only a little family trying to live as normal a life as we could in a research lab.”

He glanced away then, like he often did when he mentioned his parents. He’d been denied contact with them after being sold to the pair of varvax. Now he couldn’t remember their faces. Few of the pirates had been in here long enough to forget their pasts entirely, and many had been in a group the entire time, slowing the process. But from what I’d been able to gather, the effects were showing regardless.

“The Superiority failed you, Maksim,” Nuluba said. “Shiver is right, though I will say it more strongly than she. It failed you, as it has failed so many.”

I’d been keeping an extra close eye on Nuluba. She looked imposing in her shell-like exoskeleton. Did she realize I was plotting my escape? Was

she watching me like I watched her?

“What about you?” I asked her, trying to sound nonchalant. “Did the Superiority fail you as well?”

“In a way,” she said, the faceplate of her exoskeleton revealing the small crablike creature that was her true shape. “Or I failed it. I was a bureaucrat.”

“In the government, I assume?” I didn’t really know how other nations did things. “How high were you?”

“High?” She waved her arms, seeming amused. “Everyone always assumes that we varvax are ‘in charge’ and must be ‘so important.’ I assure you, we’re not! My. Some are, Spin of the humans, but not me. I was stationed in an irrelevant department of an oft-ignored utility. I lived on Tuma.”

“I hadn’t known that,” Maksim said. “Wow.”

“Tuma?” I asked.

“Prone to acidic rainstorms,” Maksim explained. “But near some nice resource farms. Mostly automated. Cheap place to live. Very cheap.”

“Well,” Nuluba said, “I did customer analysis for the methane utility farms. I had a lot of information—including population statistics for many planets, so I could judge trends in customer usage. Spent too much time with that data, maybe.” She turned away then, lowering her arms. The exoskeleton mimicked the way her smaller crab body moved inside. “I started asking questions. Too many questions. I was thrown in here almost before I knew what had happened...”

I frowned to myself, turning back to my work. What was Nuluba hiding? Varvax still baffled me. For example, I’d recently discovered that the fluid-filled inorganic exoskeletons weren’t straight technology, but were somehow grown and hooked directly into the varvax’s nervous system. How did that work?

“We in the Superiority failed so many,” Shiver said. “Often you grow so large—so comfortable—that you feel the cavern must be right, because it is what has been. You’re used to it, and it’s right, so everyone else must be right as well. You resonate with self-assurance, ignoring the shifting rocks

that might someday lead the cavern to collapse, crushing every crystal who lives there.”

The others nodded. I continued my diagnostic: I was working on the fourth starship, the former civilian craft that we’d been adding weapons to. Today, my job was to make sure the starship’s onboard targeting systems—which we’d just installed—were functioning correctly.

All things considered, my plan to steal it was going well. M-Bot and I had been good at firmly counting the passage of time for the last two days, so I felt more in control, more determined. Focused.

The toughest part was feeling like I was leading on the members of Cutlass Flight. Maksim, Shiver, Nuluba. Even the quiet Dllllizzzz—the other resonant in the team. She rarely spoke, though she’d also grown a crystal near where we were working, and would occasionally make it vibrate in tune with what one of us was saying—a form of approval or agreement, I thought.

A part of me naturally wanted to see this as my new family, to make a home among the people of Cutlass Flight as I had with my other companions in arms. But I couldn’t afford to bond to this group as I had to Hesho, Morriumur, and Vapor. Fortunately I recognized this impulse, and could resist with a little tactical cynicism.

*Remember that they locked you up, I told myself. Remember that they’re a bunch of pirates, not a true military.*

Theoretically, once we finished with our diagnostics, this ship would be ready to go into combat. Maksim was to be its pilot, and I would be his ground crew.

“So when you fly,” I said to him, “it will be to fight other pirate factions?”

“Mostly,” Maksim said. “Until we raid the Superiority. Peg keeps talking about a large-scale offensive against them, though they’re pretty well outfitted with fighters.”

“We have an advantage though,” Shiver noted. “Something none of the other factions have. Peg and her...history.”

This was new. I tried to show the proper amount of curiosity, but not seem too eager. Peg had a secret? Maybe with a few days of work, I could persuade them to—

“Oh right!” Maksim said. “You don’t know, do you, Spin? Peg was a Superiority officer. Head of base security at the mining station.”

Or maybe they’d just tell me.

“Head of base security,” I said. “That sounds important.”

“It was!” Maksim said. “She was second in command of the entire Surehold base. So she knows tons about the installation, their fighting protocol, and all that.”

“And she threw it away to become a pirate?” I asked.

“More they forced her away,” Maksim said.

“It’s politics, Spin,” Nuluba explained. “Peg’s one of the few people in here—pirate *or* worker—who came completely by choice. She took the job because it would advance her career; no one else was willing. Most everyone in here is a dissident like Maksim or me—even the workers don’t come by choice. They aren’t fully exiles though, right, Shiver?”

“I was a large machinery operator,” Shiver told me, her crystal vibrating. “At the Surehold mines. I was sent in here because of an accident back home that was technically my responsibility. They tell us if we work ten years in the nowhere faithfully, we’ll be allowed to leave, but that rarely happens.”

“So they have a portal?” I asked. “To the outside?”

“Yes,” Shiver said. “Right inside the base, but movement in or out is rigidly controlled.”

So, that was a potential way out after I finished following the Path of Elders—though I didn’t fancy my chances of getting to it. Sneaking into a Superiority base and somehow slipping through their tightly controlled portal seemed a poor option.

“People are rarely let out despite their ten years being up?” I asked Shiver.

“The officials find excuses,” Nuluba said softly. “Reasons to keep back the workers, forbid them from leaving.”

“I was deemed ‘too aggressive’ on my performance reviews,” Shiver said. “Not Peg’s fault, mind you. She always turned in excellent reviews for everyone. There were others who made sure that the more talented workers remained behind.”

“And they did the same to Peg?” I asked, looking around the hangar. She’d been nearby a short time ago. Or...had that been an hour or two? Scud.

“Well,” Shiver said. “First time, she re-upped on her contract willingly. I think she wanted to stay and help the workers get out. But then after twenty years in here, she decided she wanted to go. They kept their contract with her. This would be...three years ago, I think? It was time to leave, and...”

“And what?” I asked.

“They said that she could go,” Nuluba explained, “but that her children had to stay behind.”

Wait. Peg had *children*?

“They weren’t part of the deal, you see,” Shiver said. “The Superiority said they had to stay ten years and work, as they were both young adults, before they could leave. Didn’t go well. Peg’s shouting still resonates with me today.”

“Scud,” I whispered. “She seems like a bad person to betray.”

“You could say that,” Shiver said. “She stole a bunch of ships, persuaded a good thirty of us to follow her, and broke off to join the pirates. Factions formed because of her influence—she had this grand plan of uniting them against the Superiority. Take the entire base and hold it...”

Now *that* caught my attention. “That sounds awesome! We should be attacking them!”

“Tried and failed,” Shiver said. “We weren’t good enough pilots. Superiority beat us bloody. Nowadays, no one will listen to Peg. Factions are broken, squabbling. It’s hard enough to survive.”

“I’m going to get good,” Maksim said. “Learn to fly. I’ll become the pirate champion, and the Broadsiders will have respect again.”

“Wait,” I said, my eyes widening. “There’s a *pirate champion*?”



“Yeah, we came up with it a couple years back,” Nuluba said as she went over her spreadsheets for like the fourth time. “There must be a best pilot among all the factions, so why not find out who it is? We hold matches now and then. One on one, in a starfighter. Keeps things interesting.”

A pirate champion. For me to fight in a duel.

Oh stars. That was beautiful.

*No, no, I thought. No dueling. You are going to focus on the Path of Elders.*

But...

Pirate. Champion.

“I’ll beat them,” Maksim explained, “if Shiver doesn’t do it first. You’re getting really good at flying, you know.”

“I resonate with this,” Shiver said, “and appreciate the compliment. You are skilled at those, Maksim.”

“Thanks!” he said, then leaned toward me. “Shiver and I have been hatching this for a while. Current champion is one of Peg’s sons. Both of them broke off to form their own factions back after everyone failed to beat the Superiority. They won’t listen to a word Peg says, but maybe if we take them down a notch that will change.”

It was hard to resist the idea of becoming pirate champion, but I had to focus. I abruptly unplugged the diagnostic tool from the front jack of the ship I’d been working on. “Targeting systems still need recalibration,” I said, with a sigh, and showed the screen to Nuluba.

“Bother,” the varvax said. “I thought you ran it through that already.”

“Twice,” I said. “Programming must be conflicting with some of the onboard protocols. I’ll need to do a wipe and reupload the tech.”

“Run a separate diagnostic from another machine too,” she suggested. “Might be this device that has the problem.”

“Good thought,” I said, then jogged over to where M-Bot’s drone was polishing the newly repaired destructor we’d been working on. I grabbed him.

“You ready?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “Did you find out when the sensor array is going to go down?”

“No,” I said. “But we have our chance now for the upload. I think we should take it.”

“Understood.”

I sent word to Chet. *Operation “Third Time’s the Charm” is a go, Chet.*

*Good luck, Spensa, he replied. I shall endeavor not to distract you with communications, and instead sit here and pretend I’m not as nervous as a jockey at his first race!*

I smiled, imagining him compulsively weaving shoes out of reeds—which was what he said he did when nervous, to practice his survival skills. We’d talked about ways he could help, as he was nearly healed from his wound. When the actual theft happened, he would sneak in close to be ready. But for now it was best if he stayed hidden.

Hoping nobody could see how anxious I was, I walked over and jacked M-Bot into the starfighter. It wasn’t the fastest of the three—it was a glorified forklift, not a true starfighter. But it was the only choice I had.

I’d pretend that something had gone wrong with the drone, and we’d leave M-Bot hiding in the ship’s hard drives until the perfect moment. Once the scanners were down, and maybe once I’d had a chance to sabotage the other ships in some way that wouldn’t hurt the resonants. From there, escaping to go pick up Chet should be easy.

M-Bot beeped as the connection was established, and he started to upload himself. That would take about thirty minutes. I needed to find something to do that would keep me from standing around and fidgeting. To that end, I sat next to Nuluba and began sorting through a box of scrap.

I pointedly did not look at the drone. The others didn’t seem to have noticed my nervousness, not even Nuluba.

“It *is* different out here,” Nuluba was saying. “When I rode with Shiver on that scavenging mission a few weeks back, I felt *distant*. Even with others around me in the ships, it was harder to remember my past than it ever is here in the base.”

“It’s worse the farther inward you go,” Shiver said. “The mining installation is as close to the center as *I’d* ever want to go.”

That got me thinking. “So, that region closest to the lightburst. Nobody lives there?”

“No Man’s Land?” Shiver said. “No one lives there that I know. It is... an odd place. Where time distorts. Something is in there, at the center, watching outward.”

“People who get very close to the center see odd visions,” Nuluba said. “Have strange experiences.”

“Yeah,” Maksim said. “I’m not going anywhere near there. The belt is strange enough. Can you imagine if we started seeing things that aren’t there?”

“It is not so bad.”

I started. That last voice had been...Dlilllizzzz? I’d never known her to speak.

At the words, Shiver began buzzing excitedly. The pin translated. “What was that? Dlilllizzzz, you spoke! Have the reality ashes helped?”

“I...saw...” Dlilllizzzz said, her voice soft. “Saw the past...”

“Where?” I asked, leaning toward her crystal—which she’d created at the end of a line of runners leaving her ship, as Shiver had.

“Ruins,” Dlilllizzzz whispered.

Shiver continued to try to prompt her to speak, but Dlilllizzzz returned to her normal low, wordless vibrations.

I pondered what she’d said. She’d seen the past in some ruins—had she happened across one of the stops on the Path of Elders? Was Dlilllizzzz cytonic?

Shiver asked Maksim to sprinkle some reality ashes on Dlilllizzzz—they’d been doing that regularly with the ashes they’d confiscated from me. I paid attention to see if Shiver could get anything out of her, but no luck. Eventually Maksim settled down next to me and helped to sort through junk for anything useful. “You look thoughtful, Spin.”

“Merely distracted,” I said.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked. “You having troubles remembering?”

“A little,” I admitted. “Some faces, here and there.”

“That hurts,” he said. “I know how it feels. Good news is that you’ll probably start forgetting the faces of your captors too. That didn’t happen quickly enough for my taste.”

He still thought I had been a human captive. Scud, it suddenly felt awful to be doing what I was. Lying to these people, planning to steal one of their ships, maybe sabotage them.

“I wasn’t a captive, Maksim,” I said. I hadn’t meant to tell them the truth—it kind of slipped out. “I lived on a human enclave planet.”

His eyes widened. “Those are *real*?”

“One is, at least,” I said. “Not everyone in the Superiority agreed that they should exist though. There was...a lot of fighting. We’d rebel. They’d suppress it...”

It wasn’t a hundred percent the truth, but it felt good to share some of myself.

“You grew up in an actual human society?” Shiver asked. “What was it like?”

“It was hard,” I said. “My father was killed when I was young. My family had to struggle for food because resources were tight for everyone—but especially those who weren’t directly involved in fighting the Superiority.”

“So it really was like they say,” Maksim whispered. “Humans together...just leads to war.”

“Hardly,” I said. “The Superiority caused this. My people didn’t want war—we fled from it. My family—all of us humans on Detritus—were the crew on a vast starship, the *Defiant*. My great-grandmother was in the engine crew, and our starship wasn’t part of the human groups perpetuating the war.

“The enemy wouldn’t leave us alone. When we crashed on my home planet, they tried to exterminate us. Then they imprisoned us there. I think any society would turn warlike under such circumstances.”

“I wouldn’t have believed you,” Shiver said, her voice ringing out, “if I hadn’t grown so long near Maksim. Who is the least violent person I’ve met.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen me in action yet!” he said, then he made a growling sound. “Just wait until I get into the sky. I’ll be fearsome!”

“I’m sure,” Shiver said, vibrating with a sound like ringing bells—her version of laughter.

“I believe you, Spin,” Nuluba said softly, looking up from her spreadsheets. “I mentioned my job earlier. Well, one year I was analyzing population statistics on the planets of species with ‘lesser intelligence.’ My job was to suggest where to employ advertising for regions that weren’t buying our services.

“But in the data, I found unexpected truths. Many so-called lesser species *weren’t* suffering the casualty rates from intraspecies murder that we projected. They were known as aggressive species, so they should have been killing one another at horrific rates. Yet...that just wasn’t the case.

“I thought I’d hit on something so *important*. Something revolutionary. Proof that our definitions of aggression didn’t match statistical models. I spent years gathering my information, thinking I’d be heralded as some great mind.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “You presented it to your supervisors, and they immediately tossed you in here.”

“There wasn’t even a trial,” Nuluba whispered. “By the way they talked, what I’d done was *dangerous*, *subversive*. Merely *looking* for evidence that might contradict long-held beliefs was seen as aggressive.” She put her hands to her sandstone helmet. “I don’t know what they told Vormel, my mate. I didn’t get to see him again. I just...vanished.”

Maksim reached over and took Nuluba by the shoulder to offer support. Dlllllzzzz vibrated her crystal, low and sonorous, a...comforting sound. The varvax gestured in thanks.

Scud. She really was what she said, wasn’t she? An unimportant bureaucrat caught up in something bigger than she was. I felt uncomfortable, realizing how I’d viewed her. I’d done it before, with other

varvax. It was hard not to see in them the people who oppressed mine for years. Even still, even knowing what I knew.

Watching them console her, I felt like an intruder.

I'd known camaraderie like this. Expressed it, cherished it. A night spent with the other women in my flight, who refused to let me return to my cavern exile. Evenings together reminiscing about those we'd lost. In a powerful moment, I saw their *faces*. Kimmalyn, Nedd, FM, Hurl, Arturo. Jorgen...

Scud, I missed Jorgen. I found myself reaching out with my cytonic senses. Why hadn't I been able to locate him again in my dreams? As always, when I tried to reach him intentionally, I found only that other presence. That familiar one that had been nearby, like a spirit watching over me. It was more distant now. And angry at me for some reason? Was it the delver I'd contacted? Or...something more personal?

I know it was foolish, but I couldn't help feeling it was connected to my pin. And my father.

I excused myself as the others continued to comfort one another. Their genuine emotion made me feel sick. As I moved over to the bins where I could store the salvage I'd separated, I spotted something I'd missed earlier. Someone large sitting in the shadows near the closed hangar doors.

Peg. Captain of the Broadsiders. How had I missed her sitting back here? The thick-bodied alien looked particularly predatory in the shadows. And she was watching me. I didn't need to see her eyes to know that.

Right, then. I took a deep breath and strode over. I hated feeling like people were watching me, thinking about me, but saying nothing. Better to confront them.

*Of course, a similar attitude is what got me into my initial fistfight with Jorgen. So maybe I could take it a little more carefully this time?*

"Captain?" I said as I reached her. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Oh, I don't know, Spin." Peg laced her clawed fingers in front of herself. She had an almost reptilian appearance, though her skin was a thick hide instead of scales. "Words. You fit in well with the others. Adapting better to this than any other I've known. I hadn't thought you

were one to grow *heknans*. I thought you most certainly to only have *muluns*...”

“I still don’t know what that means, Captain. My pin refuses to translate the words. How do your people...grow...these things?”

“Sit,” she said, gesturing toward a folding chair.

I did as I was told.

“Your pin could be set to translate these idioms,” the captain explained. “But you obviously do not know how. It is irrelevant. My tree is distant now, and since I was forced into exile, I can barely feel it or the fruit it grows.”

“I’m...sorry?” I said.

“No need for *yendolors*,” the captain said, settling into her larger chair across from me, plainly built for one of her stature. She gestured with a clawed hand toward the members of Cutlass Flight. “They are good people, human. Better than you expected to find, yes?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

The captain’s voice grew softer. “I have watched you, Spin. I know you are a soldier, which is curious. The Superiority doesn’t often throw actual fighters in here. The government claims to hate the aggressive, but it has use for the useful, we might say. They grow so many *venmals*. You’d say it differently: that they have much hypocrisy.”

“I don’t disagree with that,” I said.

“I want you to go,” Peg said. “I don’t want you to bring trouble to these. Tonight, I will arrange for you to be unwatched. You may walk away so long as you take nothing with you that belongs to us.”

The words hit me like a brick to the face. She knew. Well, she suspected. And she understood that I was dangerous. Admittedly, I felt a little thrill. This enormous beast of a person found me intimidating?

“You’re wondering,” Peg said, “if this is a trap, to try to lure you to run so I can have proof you are untrustworthy. But we both already know you have grown too many *kitchas* for staying here. You have killed. Those here, most of them never have.”

“You’re pirates,” I said. “I saw your kind dogfighting others.”

Peg leaned forward. “I have killed, Spin. I *have* grown the *kitcha*. The fruit of the murderer. And I can recognize my kind. You will leave.”

I took a deep breath. This wasn’t what I’d been planning—but it didn’t look like I had time to wait for the sensor array to go down. M-Bot had said his transfer would take under a half hour. How long had it been?

“I will go,” I told Peg, “if you give me a ship.”

“That is not the offered deal.”

“It’s the one *I’m* offering,” I replied. “I have no specific quarrel with you and yours, Peg, but I have a duty to my people. I’m going to need one of your starfighters to accomplish that.”

We locked eyes. Scud, I knew in that moment what was going to happen next. I barely managed to throw myself to the side as she leaped for me.



# 21

Can I point out how horribly unfair it was that I kept getting into fistfights with people who were *literally* three times as big as I was? Next time, I was going to pick a fight with a damn kitsen. Karma owed it to me.

My chair went skidding out behind me as I hit the ground and rolled, coming up in a crouch as Peg grabbed the air where I'd been sitting. Wishing I had Skullbreaker, I backed away toward the tool shelf. Unfortunately, Peg wasn't about to let me search it for a weapon. She came rushing in, hands forward, claws out.

She didn't shout, growl, or call to the others. This was, as she'd said, a contest between two killers. The other Broadsiders somehow didn't count. I did.

Peg lunged for me, surprisingly quick, but I kept moving. I couldn't afford to let her pull me into a grapple; if this came to wrestling, she'd quickly use her weight to immobilize me. Instead I dodged back and forth, keeping a low crouched stance. I reached back to my training and to skills I'd gained from my life as an outcast. You learned a lot when you were the smallest, weirdest kid in the neighborhood—the one with a parent who was the wrong kind of famous.

Peg effectively kept me from reaching the tool shelf—because by going for it, I'd have been forced to turn my back on her. Fortunately, she respected me enough not to turn away and go rummaging for a weapon herself. We rounded each other, and I let her think I was going to play the grappling game, while I actually searched for any other way out.

If I ran, she'd chase me down. I had to try to wound her or knock her out. I feinted, enticing her to lunge again, then I sidestepped in close and rammed my fist into her flank. That would have been a good square-on kidney punch had she been human.

Peg grunted, but didn't seem severely hurt. I felt like I'd punched a sack of rocks—her muscles were tougher, bulkier, than those of any human I'd faced. Scud. I was *not* properly prepared for fighting aliens. Or anyone. I managed to dodge a grab for my hair. I'd let that grow way too long.

Well, she might not have had kidneys in the right place, but she did have knees. Joints had to be a weak spot, and I needed to end this quickly. So I allowed her to get close enough to grab hold of my coat. Then I twisted, fell to my knees, and rammed my elbow into her right knee. She flinched, so I hit her with my elbow again—which was screaming in pain already from the first blow. The hit worked though, sending Peg stumbling back. Directly into the tool shelf.

Metallic peals rang through the room as tools dropped free. I grabbed a wrench and—Peg still holding my jacket in a tight grip—I hit her again. Two-handed. Directly in the same knee.

She let out a howl and released me. I stepped away as she drooped forward and held her knee, grimacing. My own eyes were watering from the pain in my elbow, but I kept a tight hold of the wrench and glanced around the room.

Both Nuluba and Maksim had pulled guns on me. Great.

"I've defeated your leader!" I shouted at them, raising my wrench. "By virtue of trial by combat, I am taking over command of the Broadsiders!"

"Like hell you are," Maksim said.

Yeah, that always *had* seemed too convenient when it worked in the stories. Scud. I lowered my wrench.

Then a blue light shone behind the others. An ominous shape rose into the air, lit from below—at least until the twin destructors under the wings powered up, glowing brightly, focused on both armed Broadsiders. Maksim glanced over his shoulder, then stumbled away, his eyes wide. M-Bot had finished his upload.

They shouldn't have backed down. They could have run for me and gotten close enough to control the situation. Ship-scale weapons weren't precise enough to hit someone close to me without risking hitting me too. But that was easy to say and difficult to think of, when you were facing a pair of guns as big as you were. Both Maksim and Nuluba dropped their weapons.

I didn't wait for further invitation. I dashed between them—scooping up one of the sidearms as I ran—then leaped and pulled myself onto the wing of the hovering starfighter. I unplugged the drone, then the cockpit opened and I climbed in.

"Turn toward Shiver's ship," I said to M-Bot. "Make sure she doesn't power on."

He did so as I settled into the seat. *Saints*, it felt good to be in a cockpit again. It felt like it had been an eternity. I set aside the drone—there wasn't *nearly* as much room behind the seat as I was used to—and the comm crackled.

Finally, M-Bot's voice came out. "Wow. This comm system is *old*. I feel like I'm inhabiting a *record player*."

"I have no idea what that is," I said, doing up the buckles. Outside, Maksim and Nuluba ran to check on Peg. The resonants hadn't powered on their acclivity rings. They obviously realized I could blast them the moment they tried. I considered it briefly—that would prevent pursuit—but no. They might not be friends, but I also wasn't going to execute them in cold blood.

I felt a momentary pang for what could have been, then grabbed the controls. "Can you get the hangar doors open?"

"Give me a second...yes. This ship's system has the transmitter locked behind three layers of security. They were *really* worried about attracting delvers when they built it."

As the door opened, I kept my weapons trained on the two fighters. At last I caught blue light coming from beneath Shiver's ship.

"Don't make me unload on you two," I said, hitting the comm.

I was given no reply, though the mechanism said my words had gone through. As soon as the hangar was open, I turned the ship toward the

opening.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “Would it be all right if...if I flew?”

I hesitated. M-Bot’s programming had always prevented him from flying. When he’d wanted to come rescue me on Detritus, he’d needed to convince Cobb to fly him. This was the first time in his life that he had a chance to truly pilot a starship.

I’d been yearning for this moment, tasting it, dreaming of it. But he’d been waiting for centuries.

“Go for it,” I said, lifting my hands—with effort—from the controls.

“Oh, thank you!” he said. The ship continued turning of its own volition, then inched toward the exit—using maneuvering thrusters, not the main boosters, to avoid vaporizing the people behind us.

*Oh, scud, I thought. M-Bot is a highly advanced AI. He can think faster than any human, respond in a split second.* Why would anyone ever need a human pilot? In this moment, I saw the end of my time flying a starfighter.

Then M-Bot clipped the side of the hangar doorway as he was steering us out.

“Oops!” he said, and started turning the ship, as if to inspect what he’d done.

“No!” I said. “You’ll slam the tail into the wall. Keep going forward!”

“Right, right,” he said, wobbling the ship as it moved slowly out of the hangar. Directly toward...

“M-Bot!” I said. “*Trees!*”

“Ah yes. Trees. Hmm...”

We jerked to a halt, then floated upward, then jerked forward again as he moved us over them.

“You know,” he said, “this isn’t going as well as I thought it would.”

“Ya think?” I said, trying to look back at the hangar. “You might want to move faster...”

I couldn’t make out much, but I was pretty sure the blue glow was increasing in the hangar behind us. I could only imagine that Dllllizzzz and Shiver, seeing the awkward flying, had decided I might not be difficult prey.

The ship wobbled as he got us up over the trees.

“M-Bot!” I said.

“Hey,” he snapped, “I think I’m doing pretty well. Didn’t *you* crash into the mess hall on your first day?”

“A holographic mess hall,” I said.

“Well, I haven’t crashed into *any* mess halls. Look, I’m a computer program—do you know how hard it is for someone like me to do something that isn’t explicitly in my programming?”

“No.”

“It’s *impossible*,” M-Bot said. “That’s how hard it is. And I’m doing it *anyway*.”

“You flew the drone just fine.”

“I borrowed the drone’s hard-coded flight instructions from its rudimentary firmware. I don’t have that anymore!”

A starfighter darted out of the hangar, and another one followed. Two blips appeared on our proximity sensors.

“Oh,” M-Bot said. “They’re going to try to kill us, aren’t they?”

“Yup.”

“You wanna...”

I seized the control sphere and the throttle, then slammed on the overburn, kicking us into some real speed. We blasted away from the fragment with a roar that vibrated the cockpit. It took me by surprise. I’d been fighting in the vacuum of space too much recently; I hoped my atmospheric flight instincts weren’t rusty. Starships were built to minimize the difference, but in a firefight you lived or died based on tiny mistakes.

The thing was, I didn’t *want* to get into a firefight. Shiver and Dllllizzzz seemed like good people. I was willing to steal one of their ships, but I wasn’t about to shoot them dead. Not unless they forced my hand.

First we’d see if they could keep up.

I swooped across the neighboring fragment—which was flowing with waterfalls that ran over the sides and vanished into infinity. My tails followed and *immediately* opened fire. Scud. I’d hoped maybe they’d be hesitant to kill me. I fell into evasive zigzags by rote, then dove over the side of the fragment, parallel to the falling water. My stomach tried to crawl

out through my esophagus, and a moment later the ship's GravCaps were overwhelmed and I was slammed by g-forces, and nearly hit a red-out.

I pulled up, gritting my teeth. "These GravCaps are terrible."

"No surprise there," M-Bot replied. "Not only is it a civilian craft, it's so old it's practically an antique."

"Your original ship was two hundred years old."

"And three hundred years ahead of its time," he said. "This thing was outdated when they made it. It was a fast production-line model made cheaply."

"Delightful."

"Indeed!" Shots trailed us. "Um, don't look at the shield."

"It's bad?"

"It's mostly there to help in minor collisions. It can take maybe two hits from a destructor." Another shot almost struck us. "Uh...wow. Spensa, is this what it feels like to be freaked out? I think it *is* what it feels like to be freaked out. Oh, how wonderful! I hate it!"

The destructor fire was blue rather than the red I was used to, but that was probably because it was from a different technological line. I dodged back upward, but one of the shots hit, making the invisible shield around my ship crackle.

The low-shield warning started blinking on the control panel. Yeah, low shields after a *single* shot? I guess that was what I got for flying a consumer-grade ship. And my top speed in atmosphere appeared to be terrible—the ship was rattling like the caverns did during debris falls.

Fortunately, we'd outfitted the ship with an offensive complement: two destructors and an IMP for bringing down enemy shields. That would also negate my own shield when used, but seeing as mine was apparently about as useful as a cardboard box, I'd take my chances.

Most importantly, my ship had that light-lance for towing. I knew now that I wasn't going to be able to outrun my tails, and I certainly wasn't going to out-endure them. But with the right equipment, I was pretty sure I could outfly them.

I swung over the top of a dust-covered fragment, kicking up an incredible wake. The destructor fire went wild then; the resonants weren't used to flying through debris. They should have switched to firing by instruments.

I took a steep dive over the side of the fragment, but launched my light-lance and stuck it to the edge. Like a ball on the end of a chain, I swung around in the air, pivoting in a turn that would have been impossible without an energy rope. I gave my GravCaps a second to reset as I wove along the side of the fragment, then dove and light-lanced again to spin under it, after which I had to flip over to orient my acclivity ring downward. Whatever the other strange laws of physics were in this place, gravity worked like I expected it to.

The bottom of this fragment was furrowed and marked by chunks of stone—like a cave roof with stalactites, only much larger. I wove through these, and my proximity readout told me the two starships came in to follow.

They quickly lost ground on me, despite flying faster ships. Without light-lances, they had to swing around more slowly to get under the fragment—plus they obviously weren't as comfortable flying through obstacles at high speed as I was. The truth was, they shouldn't have followed me. Indeed, they made a common combat mistake that Cobb had beaten out of me in my first month of training. Never get too wrapped up in the chase that you forget good tactics.

In this case, they should have flown down farther below the fragment, where being able to fly straight would have made their superior speed an advantage. That told me they didn't think tactically; they had learned to dogfight on their own, without training, and would make rookie mistakes despite their skill.

Perfect.

"Spensa," M-Bot said, "I fear I must warn you that I've intercepted chatter from the other Broadsiders. They're waking the off-duty flights and are scrambling both of them to add to the chase. You have approximately seven minutes until this fight is joined by six more ships."

I should have been worried about that. But *scud*, this felt good. I was terrible at a lot of things. I was coming to acknowledge that the friendships I had were all *despite* my efforts, not *because* of them. I was insubordinate and stupid when my temper took over. My spying and diplomatic skills were laughable.

But I could fly.

Hot *damn*, I could finally fly again.

I spun through the air, leading my two tails in a grand chase around three separate fragments. What had felt vast to cross on foot now passed as momentary flashes of color. Gaps that had felt insurmountable now proved exciting for me to weave through, using my light-lance to make the tighter turns. The weak GravCaps meant I took more g-forces than I wanted, but I could mitigate that with careful flying.

All the while, I kept watch on the proximity sensor, reinforcing my judgment of the two resonants. They really needed some light-lances, plus proper training to use them. And they were too free with their shots. Cobb had reamed me on multiple occasions for my overeager trigger finger. You'd think that firing at all times would be smart, that it would give you the most opportunities to hit. You'd be wrong. Wild firing not only risked danger to your allies, it trained you not to aim.

"Spensa," M-Bot said, "something is odd about this weapon fire."

"The strange color?" I said, veering us down to the left between a pair of fragments.

"More than that," M-Bot said. "I've been running diagnostics on this vessel, and our own destructors have a pair of attachments on them."

"Like the ones on that unit we repaired?"

"Exactly. They modify the weapon fire..." He hesitated. "Spensa, I think it makes the destructors nonlethal. They're meant to overwhelm electronic systems and make a ship lock up."

Wait.

*Wait.*

Suddenly I understood why no pirates got shot down on raids. I understood how a group like this could even *function*. They had no access



to manufactories—they had to use what they could steal or salvage. If ships were lost in firefights with any regularity, soon nobody would have anything to fly.

That explained why the resonants were so quick to fire on me. They weren't trying to destroy me or the ship. They were trying to capture me again.

"But when you powered on in the hangar," I said, "the pirates all seemed extremely worried about being shot by the destructors."

"The amount of energy released is still significant," M-Bot said. "A fragile flesh body wouldn't want to be subjected to one of those shots."

Well, okay then. This escape had just become more interesting.

As my two resonant tails dove after me, I checked the chronometer. Despite feeling like it was much longer, we'd been dogfighting for only a few minutes. I had a little time until the other ships launched from the hangars—assuming M-Bot's projection of their load-in time was correct.

I hit the overburn, forcing the enemy ships to do likewise. They knew enough to rely on their superior speed on a straightaway. But as they were focused on that, I flipped off the overburn and hit my speedbrake, cutting the booster and increasing drag. I darted backward—or, well, they darted forward. Either way, the two ships passed me in a flash. I hit the IMP right as they did.

A claxon went off on my dash, warning that my lame shield was finished. I trained on Dllllizzzz's ship and fired, hoping M-Bot's guess about the destructors was correct. The ship flashed blue as I scored direct hits, then its boosters powered off. The ship continued on in the direction it had been going—which, as I considered, could be dangerous. Fortunately, the acclivity ring stayed active, so the ship didn't drop, and it didn't seem to be in danger of a collision anytime soon.

Shiver's ship veered off wildly, as if panicked to realize I'd suddenly gone on the offensive. I tracked it easily, expecting...

Yup, a loop to try to get around to tail me again. Executed well, actually. As I twisted my ship and picked her off, I had to admire her skill.

Considering that they were all self-taught, that had been a pretty good maneuver.

“I still think it’s unfair,” M-Bot said, “that you can fly better than I can.”

“I have training. You don’t.”

“I’m a computer program. The only training I should need is some lines of code.”

I shot Shiver’s vessel with my light-lance and pulled it to a stop before it slammed into the nearby fragment. Then I cut the light-lance and blasted off—straight toward the fragment with the Broadsider base.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “Do you think we could get me proper code to fly and fight?”

“I think that even with some extra lines of code, you’d be missing something.”

“What?”

“Style.”

I came up under the Broadsider fragment, then shot my light-lance onto the edge and used it to curve up and around, flipping so I flew in low along the ground. The hangars were directly ahead. Flight doors open.

I aimed and shot a ship hovering out of the doorway. I hit it square on, and it couldn’t dodge, so I quickly overwhelmed the shield and locked the ship up. I did the same at the next hangar in line.

In seconds, I’d effectively created a traffic jam. With the two ships blocking the way, the others couldn’t escape—at least not without towing their friends out of the way first. I intended to be long gone by then. I just needed my icon.

I flew us to the other side of the hangars. “Take over,” I said, unbuckling. “Warn me if any of them get out of that mess. If I don’t return in time, hover up and start firing at them. You might get lucky and hit one.”

“Oh. Uh...”

I popped the canopy as the ship drifted over to the boulder behind the Broadsider camp. I heard shouts and curses from inside the hangars. A quick glance showed me only one person had thought to duck out back to see what I was doing. Maksim, standing in the open door to his building.

I raised my sidearm. Maksim was armed too, but as he saw me, he didn't raise his own weapon. Smart man.

I quickly located the place where I'd stuffed the icon. Keeping mostly hidden behind the boulder, I dug down to find...

Nothing.

My father's pin wasn't there.

# 22

It was strange how hard that hit me. It wasn't even *really* my father's pin. I still didn't have an explanation for how it had shown up in my pocket—but then again, I also didn't have a good explanation for how water appeared on the fragments.

Still, in losing the icon, I felt as if I had been robbed of something deeply personal. My only tangible link to the world I'd left. My source of stability.

*Chet! I sent. The icon is gone!*

*What?* he replied. *Miss Nightshade, I didn't have anything to do with it!*  
*I vow upon my—*

*I believe you,* I said. *I know you didn't take it, Chet. But it is gone. How?*  
*I have no idea,* he replied.

*All right. I'm coming to get you.*

*Wait. Coming to get me?*

*I had to steal the ship now instead of later,* I said. *I'll explain in a bit.*

With a growl of annoyance at the empty hole, I dashed back to the ship and hauled myself into the cockpit—keeping an eye on Maksim the whole way. He didn't raise his weapon. I nodded to him, and in seconds I had M-Bot cruising toward Chet. I could feel him with my mind, but it was still an enormous relief when I saw him standing at the edge of the blue jungle fragment, one hand raised high in greeting, the other in an improvised sling, with the sleeve of his jacket hanging loose.

I pulled the ship up beside the fragment and popped the canopy—then immediately started my ship’s shield ignition process. It was a terrible shield, but better than nothing.

I began to climb out to help Chet aboard, but he deftly managed to scramble up the wing on his own. Standing just beside the canopy, he gave me a wide mustachioed grin, then gestured with one hand to the ship. “Our mighty steed. She is beautiful!”

“You won’t say that after you see her specs,” I said. I stood and pulled the seat forward, revealing the cargo space behind it in the cockpit. “Sorry about the accommodations.”

“I’ve known worse,” Chet said, squeezing into the spot. “But we have a problem. Without the icon, I worry about us traveling alone, long term.”

“You have the ashes I gave you though, right?” I said.

“I do indeed. They should last us a few weeks at least.”

“Good enough for now,” I said. “We’ll escape, then try to figure out what happened to my icon.” I closed the canopy and locked my seat into place. There was barely enough room for Chet behind me. It would have to do. Because we had a more pressing problem.

“All nine fighters are giving chase,” M-Bot said. “They have restored the two resonants. Everyone will be upon us soon.” He helpfully zoomed out the proximity display to show the Broadsiders as blips on the screen.

“With their scanner active,” Chet said, “I fear for our ability to continue our quest.”

“Any suggestions?”

“We could bolt for another pirate faction’s territory,” he said. “But that could backfire. The other faction would naturally assume us to be part of a Broadsider raid, and would react accordingly.”

Well, if it got the Broadsiders to drop off for a short time, then maybe we could use it. I turned the ship to the heading M-Bot indicated and started us flying.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “I have bad news.”

“We’re not going to make it?” I guessed.

“Judging our top speed against those of the faster Broadsider ships, no. We’ll be intercepted before we reach the border.”

Scud. I glanced to the side as I felt Chet’s hand on my shoulder, reaching from behind the seat.

“There is another option,” he said. “We could fly straight up.”

I glanced upward through the canopy into that infinite pink sky. “What’s up there?”

“I don’t know,” Chet said. “I’ve never explored that direction. Just as I’ve never left this larger region. There are distant sections of the belt, to the right and left, but those involve large gaps between fragments that are dangerous to cross alone, even when flying.

“I’ve warned you it’s dangerous to stray far from the fragments. We can quickly lose our identities if we fly upward, but we have ashes, which should delay the effects.”

It took me only a moment to decide. I pulled up, sending the ship—already rattling from our excessive speed—straight upward into that vast unknown.

The blips on my screen slowed. Excellent. We flew for a good fifteen minutes, and I started to relax as it became increasingly obvious that the Broadsiders were not giving chase.

“Spensa,” M-Bot said. “We’re being hailed by the Broadsiders. Do you want me to put them on the comm?”

“Go ahead,” I said.

The comm crackled in an old-timey way. I tried to see it as quaint, and not another indication that my ship was two shakes and a stern glare away from falling apart.

“Spin!” Peg’s voice blared into the cockpit. “You *mulun*-growing reprobate! Why didn’t you *tell* me you were a *pilot*!”

That wasn’t the tone I’d been expecting.

“You figured out I was a soldier, Peg,” I said.

“I thought you were some type of special forces trooper!” she shouted. “The way you prowled about. Words! You had a security drone disguised as a cleaning drone. How was I supposed to know you were a pilot?”

“I’ve probably made it obvious that I know my way around a starfighter.”

“Know your way... No need for *kalams* of humility. I watched you fly on our scanner, and that was some of the best piloting I’ve ever seen. I spent some time with the drone pilots on Culmira Station, and they have *nothing* on you, girl. Even *Shiver* is impressed.”

“Well, I appreciate the compliment,” I told her. “Tell the others I’m sorry for stealing a ship. I have a galaxy to save. Once I’m finished, I’ll see if there’s anything that can be done to help you all.”

“Spin,” Peg said, her voice growing softer. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Right now? I’m losing you all.”

“Yeah?” Peg said. “Do you know what happens to a person if they stray too far away from the fragments?”

I didn’t respond.

“Even *if* you survive this next part,” Peg said, “what are you going to do then? You can’t stay up there very long, and our scanner will tell us when you come back down. We’ll be on you in no time. Veer right or left, and you’ll have to deal with one of the other factions.

“I suppose you could move inward—which would run you straight into the Superiority mining facility. Let me promise you that they keep careful watch on their borders—we’ve raided them enough to warrant that. You’re good. But can you outfly a hundred enemy ships? Worse, can you do it in *that* piece of junk?”

“I guess we’ll see,” I told her.

She swore softly. “A person needs more than *muluns*, girl. *Think* for a moment. You can’t survive in this place alone. You need allies, friends, support.”

“Spensa,” M-Bot said, temporarily muting the comm, “look at Chet.”

I glanced over my shoulder and around the seat’s head support to where he sat scrunched up behind. The older man’s eyes had glazed over. He stared ahead, insensate, and didn’t respond when I waved my hand in front of him.

Something began streaming up around him: a glittering, silvery haze. The reality ashes. I felt it too, as they spun around me, like they were... disintegrating?

Being up here was destroying them, perhaps to keep us from losing ourselves. I gritted my teeth and leveled out the ship, not gaining any more altitude.

"Peg is talking again," M-Bot said quietly.

I nodded, having him restore the comm line.

"You're going to start feeling it soon, if you haven't already," Peg said. "Can you remember yourself, girl?"

"I'm fine," I said through gritted teeth.

"Are you? Can you remember the faces of your parents? Your friends from home?"

I tried not to listen—but I didn't dare turn off the comm. Because scud, she was right. What *did* they look like? The reality ashes seemed to be struggling to keep me from forgetting my identity, and I felt my memories begin to fade.

"Maybe you can fight through an entire armada on your own," Peg said. "I don't know. But the longer you stay up there, the more you will lose. And traveling on your own will be bad for you, even if you aren't so high. Your address back home, your most passionate moments, the names of your lovers. They'll blur. Your life will become like a smudge on paper—a black smear where words used to be."

I hovered there, infinity stretching in all directions. Dominated still, however, by the lightburst. And in there, I could feel the delvers. They were hunting for me. Out here, up high, they could find me. And in revenge, they'd do to me something alien, something terrible. They'd take my self. My identity. My memories.

"Something odd has been happening lately," Peg said over the comm. "I have reports of people becoming like delvers, with glowing eyes. You can't fly alone, Spin. It's not because you're weak. No matter how determined you are, you still need ties to reality."



I took a deep breath. “I can’t afford to spend years cleaning landing gear, Peg.”

“Girl, you’re wasted on ground crew,” Peg said. “You return, and I’ll give you our best ship.”

“No offense, Peg,” I said. “But I just beat you with a wrench and stole from you. I didn’t want to do it, but you backed me into a corner and forced my hand. I can’t believe that you’d simply let me go after that.”

“Oh, I won’t simply let you go,” Peg said. “I’ll give you that ship in exchange for something.”

“What?”

“How would you feel about defeating the pirate champion for me?”

I frowned. I mean, I wasn’t opposed to the idea at all—but the way she asked about it worried me. Made me think she had some game she was playing, beyond that of the other pirates.

But scud, I didn’t know how long the ashes would last. And Chet... something bad was happening to him. I decreased power to the acclivity ring, lowering us slowly through the sky.

This could all be a trap. But...Peg was correct; we couldn’t fly up that high. Pushing aside my worry for Chet, I tried to focus on the conversation.

“Why do you care about something like a pirate champion?” I asked Peg.

“I don’t, really,” she said. “But I need to take back Surehold—the Superiority mining outpost. My home.”

Take back the Superiority base? Curious. If Chet was right, and the Path of Elders was going to continue on inward toward the lightburst, I’d need to find a way to sneak through Superiority territory. If they were busy fighting off pirates, that would certainly provide some useful cover.

“I’m listening,” I said, leaning forward. “Tell me more.”

“There are enough pirates in the factions to challenge the Superiority presence in here,” Peg said. “If we attacked together, we could overwhelm them and seize control of the mining base.”

“That sounds great,” I said, “but how exactly are you going to get the other pirate factions to follow you? Last I heard, even your *sons* don’t listen

to you anymore.”

Peg laughed. “There’s more to this than you know, Spin. I can make it work. I merely need an excellent pilot to start the tree growing by defeating the champion.”

I lowered us farther, and heard Chet stir. I glanced at him and saw him blinking. The ashes had stopped disintegrating, and I had the feeling I’d dodged something very dangerous by coming back down as quickly as I had.

“Very well, Peg,” I said. “I’ll consider this, but before we agree I have one more condition. There are some ruins I need to visit here in your territory. Give me a ship, let me visit those ruins, and I’ll take down that champion for you.”

“Ruins? Words, girl. I can take you to some ruins. We’ll do it tomorrow. Look, this is a good deal. You help me—maybe give my fighters a few pointers to help them improve—and we’ll deal a serious blow to the Superiority. Isn’t that alone worth it? If we stop their acclivity stone mining operations, your war gets way easier. Plus, when you leave us next time, you’ll have *earned* that ship you’re taking from us. What do you say?”

“Give me a moment.” I flicked off the comm.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “I’m worried. Are you feeling better?”

Was I? I took a deep breath, sorting through my memories. I...yes, I remembered. Jorgen, Kimmalyne, FM, Arturo, Nedd. Cobb. Gran-Gran. My mother.

I could remember them...but scud, their faces weren’t clear to me anymore. It had been getting worse each day I spent in here. I was losing things. Pieces of who I’d been.

But at least I had recovered most of what I’d lost from flying up so high.

“Miss Nightshade?” Chet asked. “Perhaps my suggestion wasn’t the most...wise.”

“It kind of worked,” I said, glancing back at him. “Kind of didn’t. How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been used as a chew toy by a Markivian barrow-wolf,” he said. “Did I miss anything?”

“The Broadsiders want me to return,” I said. “They say they’ll trade me a ship—a good one—and take me to the next step on the Path. But I have to agree to defeat the pirate champion for them.”

“That’s an...odd request,” he said. “I wasn’t aware that their little championship mattered so much. Peg is planning something. I suspect she always has been.”

“She wants to take back the Superiority base,” I said. “She told me that much.”

“Ambitious!” Chet said. “I like it. Well, I doubt we’ll get a better deal. I say we agree. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“They take us prisoner and chain us to the wall.”

“Whereupon we get to escape again!” Chet said, and then he continued, more subdued—losing a bit of the affectation. “I have spent a long time traveling alone, Spensa. Your company is remarkable, truly, but it would be...reassuring to spend a period with a group.”

“M-Bot?” I asked.

“If it lets me get out of this ship into something built in the last century,” he said, “I’m for it.”

I flicked the comm back on. “All right, Peg. You have a deal.”

“Ha! Words.”

“One thing though,” I said. “You’re going to have to clean up another bunk. I’m bringing a friend.”

I turned off the comm and steered us back the way we’d come. The other ships must have landed while we were flying, since as I approached the Broadsider fragment I could see that the pirates were all outside, gathered in front of their hangars. A ragtag group to be certain, but I supposed I’d seen worse. Skyward Flight, for example, when we’d first started training.

I guided my ship over and settled down. With a shared look of determination, Chet and I climbed out of the cockpit. I still half expected

the Broadsiders to take us captive, but fortunately nobody pulled a gun. We even got a few cheers.

It was forced, and I saw in Maksim's eyes a healthy distrust. An emotion I'd certainly earned.

Well, I would deal with that. Because at long last, Operation Ship-Steal had succeeded. And tomorrow I could finally continue the Path of Elders.

# 23

The next day, I awoke with renewed determination. Peg assigned me the new ship—a powerful two-seat striker. Fully loaded with formidable destructors and twin boosters, it was larger than most ships I'd flown, but should still be maneuverable.

It was the best ship in Peg's small fleet. I transferred M-Bot to it—after some careful digging I realized they still didn't know he was an AI; they thought I had used remote control to make the ship hover the previous day. I made some modifications he said would insulate his core systems from destructor blasts, then installed a light-lance.

After that, Chet and I climbed aboard.

"You sure you don't want your own ship?" I asked him as we strapped in. "I don't particularly need a copilot, since, you know..."

M-Bot was humming happily. Apparently he approved of the specs on this new ship.

"I wouldn't want to try the controls with this wounded arm," Chet said, fitting on a flight helmet. "And beyond that, it has been...well, centuries since I've flown. I think perhaps I should like to take this slowly."

Fair enough. As we readied ourselves, a small group of Broadsiders prepared to escort us. Peg, the resonants, and Maksim—who unfortunately inherited my weaker ship. In a few short minutes we'd all launched into the air and started on our way. I immediately felt the joy of flying a *real* starfighter. It banked at a touch, accelerated or decelerated with ease. At

high speeds, I could close my eyes and barely make out the whistle of air outside. Not a single rattle.

It felt like *forever* since I'd had a true top-of-the-line starfighter.

"What'd I tell you?" Peg said through the comm. "Are you growing *keefos* yet?"

I thought those were the happy ones. "At least seven," I said, banking again.

"I took that ship out myself a few times," Peg said. "Never into combat though. It was just too spectacular to risk damaging it with my clunky flying. But you...you're perfect for it, Spin."

"Will Guntua forgive me for taking it?"

"She has been wanting to back off from flying anyway," Peg said. "Take a break, do some ground duty instead."

How could anyone grow *tired* of this? I didn't know Guntua well—she was a heklo from one of the other flights—but I supposed if she'd wanted to keep flying, she'd have been given what was now Maksim's ship.

Peg genuinely seemed to have forgiven me, but the others now stepped far more lightly around me. It hurt to see how Shiver made certain never to let her ship stray out in front of mine, as if she worried I'd start shooting again.

I couldn't blame them. I would have acted the same way—or likely worse. At least Chet seemed to be enjoying himself; I could call up his camera feed on the corner of my screen. He was looking out the canopy with an almost childlike grin on his face.

We soared across several fragments, startling a small herd of something that looked like ostriches—but with feet on their backs as well as underneath them. The readout said it would take roughly two hours of flying to reach our destination, and though a part of me was wistful for the time Chet and I had spent adventuring together, I was certainly glad I didn't have to hike all this distance on foot.

"So," Peg said, her voice in my ear via my new helmet, "don't suppose you'd be willing to give us a few tips as we fly. To improve our combat, make it like yours?"

“That isn’t the sort of thing a ‘few tips’ can achieve, Peg,” I said. “But there are some formation exercises I could teach you while we fly.”

“Excellent,” Peg said.

Over the next half hour, I explained to Cutlass Flight some basics that I thought they were lacking. The importance of a wingman. The value of drilling on formations. The purpose of group responses. I soon had them paired off—Maksim with Peg, the two resonants together—and doing sprints. One would spring forward, fire their IMP, then fall back to reignite, while the other darted forward in a guard position.

They took my instruction without complaint, and after a short time I had a solid gauge of their abilities. Shiver was good, Dllllizzzz not far behind her. Peg was better than she claimed, though her shuttle wasn’t terribly fast. She was more a gunship and support flyer. Maksim wasn’t great, but he was so excited and eager, which counted for a lot.

After the team sprints, I taught them some scatter formations—where the four would fly together, then break apart and weave through the air defensively before coming back into the same configuration. They picked that up quickly.

“Good,” I told them. “Now watch as I sketch this next formation on your monitors. I want you to do the same break and scatter, but then return into a group of *three*. One of you is going to hang back to fire at the enemy, who has hopefully been confused by your maneuvers.”

“Fascinating,” Shiver said. “It’s like...shining with part of your body to distract, while the rest of you grows in another direction.”

“Yeah, or like a street-fighting trick,” I said. “Get them to watch one hand while you prepare to claw their eyes out with the other one.”

“Uh...” Shiver said. “You are a unique individual, Spin.”

“Yeah, I know. Bless my stars,” I said. “Just trust me—learn to work as a group and you’ll have a huge advantage on the battlefield.”

They did as I asked, slowly figuring out this more complex formation. I gave tips, digging back to what Cobb had taught me when I’d been new.

“You’re good at this,” Chet said from behind me as they ran through another scatter formation. “I see a natural teacher in you!”

“I’m good at pretending,” I said. “Most of this is just stuff I’m regurgitating from what I was taught.”

“And what precisely do you think teaching *is*, mmm?” he said. “You have confidence, credibility, and empathy. I think you are excellent at this duty.”

I sat a little taller at those words, and the experience made me want to fall back into the role I’d taken with the team on Starsight: that of the drillmaster. That was dangerous. I wasn’t going to be with the Broadsiders long enough to train them extensively.

I gave them a short break, with a compliment on their skills, and Peg pulled up on my wing. Her shuttle looked slapped-together, but that was deceptive. It held an exceptionally strong shield and powerful guns. In a proper fire team, with faster ships to keep the enemy from swarming her, she’d be a force to reckon with.

Though she was the leader, she’d done as I directed during instruction without complaining or pulling rank. That said a lot about her, all of it good. She was humble enough to take direction in order to achieve her goals.

“How do you feel?” she asked. “Memories are good?”

“They are,” I said. “I can remember my name, my friends. Most of it.”

“There’s something about being part of a team that helps us all,” she replied. “Even when we aren’t immediately close to one another. It’s like how a forest is stronger than a tree, eh? The roots interlock, and the fruit grows for all in more abundance.”

“It’s like a crystal lattice, Peg,” Shiver said over the comm. “The structure of a crystal is strong because of how the individual atoms align together.”

“Well,” Maksim said, “I guess *I’m* supposed to say it’s like a herd of cattle. Or maybe a line of fence posts. Or some other cowboy crap.”

“Cowboy?” I asked.

He paused a moment when I spoke. Perhaps I was reading too much into it, but I felt he had to struggle not to snap at me. Because of how I’d betrayed his trust.



He continued speaking though. As if he were trying to give me a second chance. “Haven’t I told you, Spin? In the Superiority, everyone thinks of humans as these ravening monsters—and so they *love* our old lore. Pirates, Gurkhas, the Tuskegee Airmen, and—unfortunately—cowboys. So they’d always expect me to talk like one. Even though my heritage from Old Earth is Ukrainian.”

“I...don’t know where that was,” I admitted.

“It didn’t have cowboys,” Maksim said. “You have no idea how annoying those hats are. My owners always claimed that they were using me for scientific study—but you wouldn’t have known it from the way they showed me off at parties.”

“Parties,” Shiver said. “Such an interesting concept. How you motiles insist you need time apart—yet when you want to enjoy yourselves, you always simply come back together. Why leave in the first place?”

“I have a friend,” I said, thinking of Rig, “who’d disagree that being together is when we enjoy ourselves. I think he has the most fun when everyone leaves him alone.”

“Curious, curious,” Shiver said. And Dlllllzzzz added a hum in the background.

I’d tried to picture their cavernous homeworld—like Detritus, only with each and every tunnel full of different crystalline tendrils, networks of individuals who explored by growing themselves outward.

“All right,” I said over the comm, “we have some travel time left. Do a few more team sprints and prove you can execute them without making fools of yourselves.”

Maksim groaned. “We just spent an *hour* on sprints!”

“You still need to work on fundamentals, Maksim,” I said. “Learn what you can from me while I’m here. You people fly like a bunch of pig farmers.”

“I take it pig farmers do not often fly well in your culture, Spin?” Shiver said.

“Ask Maksim,” Peg said. “He’s the cowboy.”

I smiled, their banter reminding me of flying with my friends. Though this felt different. In Skyward Flight, our banter—although genuine—had always had an edge. We'd been a few bold fighters facing overwhelming odds. We'd gone into each fight knowing it might be the one where we lost someone we loved.

The Broadsiders didn't have the same sense to them. They were relaxed as they ran through more sprints. When one got something wrong, they all laughed it off. Skyward Flight hadn't done that—because there, if one of us kept screwing up, it would get everyone killed.

Was this what it felt like to relax? Scud. Listening to them, I realized I really *didn't* know what it felt like to just...live. Without worrying about a bomb annihilating my entire civilization one night while I slept. Without fearing that my friends wouldn't be coming home tomorrow. Or, more recently, without wondering if I'd be discovered as an impostor.

As they practiced, I glanced over the landscape. Once you got past the fact that this place could literally consume your memories and identity, it was beautiful. An endless open sky, cast faintly pink-violet, interrupted by floating islands. Each fragment was a different biome, inviting a new adventure. And beyond that, the lightburst.

Though it was still distant, today I felt something...drawing me toward it. Chet thought we'd need to go right up close to it to finish the Path of Elders, and looking into that full light now, I knew it was true. I'd walk the Path. But at the end I'd face *them*.

Whatever else happened here, that was my destination.

I shook myself out of that trancelike state and patched through on the comm to Peg, looking for a distraction. "Hey," I said as she finished her sprints. "Could I get more details on your plan? How exactly is me fighting the pirate champion going to help you win the Superiority base?"

She was quiet for a moment, seeming to consider. Finally she answered, pulling her shuttle up beside my ship. "You know about my past? The others told you?"

"You were chief security officer at Surehold," I said. "The Superiority treated you dirty, not allowing your kids to leave with you when your time

was up.”

“Correct,” Peg said. “So I grew a few *hanchals* about that, I’ll tell you. And I wasn’t the only one. The base had been losing people for years. The factions hadn’t grown yet, but there were plenty of smaller bands, with a ship or two, roving around out here.”

“It was a big deal when you left,” Chet said. “Everyone heard about it. A high officer defecting? Gathering all the dissidents, raiders, and wanderers to raise up a giant pirate armada?”

“Yeah, well,” Peg said, “it wasn’t enough. I failed back then, and my supposed ‘giant armada’ shattered into the factions. Still, I’ve been thinking about it these last three years, considering what I did wrong. Planning...”

I nodded, thoughtful. “Wasn’t Shiver with you, back at the base?”

“Yeah, about a third of it defected when I did,” Peg said. “They form the bulk of the pirates. Shiver’s not the only Broadsider who left with me. There are a bunch of us, like RayZed and Guntua. And I almost had more—almost got the entire base to up and revolt.”

“Their failure to do so smacks of cowardice,” Chet said.

“No,” Peg said. “No, that’s not it. I understand them, Chet. They’re not cowards. Just ordinary people trying to live in a difficult place. Back when I was security officer, I was the one who installed the nonlethal weapons on our ships—my argument being that we couldn’t afford to throw away the ships the malcontents had stolen. Truth is, though, I grew *urichas*. I knew those dissidents were just like us. I didn’t want to be in the business of shooting them down.”

“So wait,” I said. “You’re saying that the Superiority forces in here, they use nonlethal weapons too?”

“Yup,” Peg said. “Pretty much everyone does. We have this understanding—none of us want to be killing each other.”

“So civilized!” Chet said. “I approve.”

“Well,” Peg said, “the high-ups in the somewhere, they’d rather it be deadly in here. Fortunately they’re far away. Regardless, Spin, this is important to understand. Those people at Surehold? They *almost* joined me when I left. They *want* to escape—but they’re scared of the Superiority, and

of the officers that are still loyal. If we give them a nudge, prove that my force is stronger, they'll join us. I'm certain of it."

That explained a lot. The pirates didn't want to lose equipment to damage, because repairs were difficult for them—and the Superiority forces weren't zealots or loyalists. They didn't want to die to defend a stupid mining base—but they had to make a good showing for their superiors.

So nonlethal weapons were used all around. I found it interesting how humane things became once the people far up the command chain—the ones who didn't have to bleed for the decisions they made—couldn't force everyone into line.

"I don't understand why the pirates have these little squabbles and do meaningless raids against each other though," I said. "If *I* were in charge of one of these pirate factions, I wouldn't waste time with champions or duels. I'd raid a group smaller than mine, freeze their ships, then steal the lot of them. In a few weeks I'd be queen of all the pirates."

"You really are terrifying sometimes, kid," Peg replied.

A question occurred to me. "Do you guys have, like, golden tankards or anything? I mean, I know we don't drink here, but I've always wanted a golden tankard...or maybe one made out of bone. The stories mention ones made from the skulls of one's enemies, but it seems like the drink would leak out the eyeholes. Unless your enemies have no eyes, I guess. Hmm..."

Peg had fallen silent. Oh. Maybe that last part had been a little much. I was trying to get better at this sort of thing. I should probably leave skulls out of conversations.

"I'm glad to finally meet a human who lives up to the stories," Peg said. "But no, we're not going to be giving you any tankards made of skulls."

"Still," I said. "Chet's right—it's remarkably civilized in here. I...have trouble accepting that nobody has ruined it."

"That's because you spent your life fighting to the death," Peg said. "We have a different problem."

"You feel your *self* dribbling away each day," Chet agreed. "Having something to do is important. The sparring, the duels... These invigorating activities give the pirates purpose, don't they?"

“Yeah,” Peg said. “And no one wants to ruin what they have. That’s part of the problem. Every time I pitch the idea of seizing Surehold, the pirates get frightened. Unnerved. They like the way things are. With six different pirate factions, there’s always a raid to plan, a ship to repair, a mission to execute, or territory to defend. It’s...it’s what they want.”

“But you want something more,” I said.

“Yes,” Peg admitted. “Maybe I’m a little too much like you. A little too much like the people outside. I can’t feel safe as long as the Superiority is there—at any moment, they could send an enormous force through the portal and crush us with lethal weapons and swarms of drones.

“My people won’t be safe in here until *I* control that portal. Until I can lock it on our side. And then we can undermine Superiority acclivity stone production, starve their forces on the other side. Payback for what they did to me and mine.”

There was an encouraging vengefulness in her tone. I approved. The others were playing games, and Peg wanted to protect that. But she knew real danger, real killing. She still hadn’t explained how the pirate champion related to all of this, but I let it die for now. Because up ahead I saw our destination at last. A lonely fragment covered in ancient structures.

It was time.

# 24

We swooped down toward the fragment, which was bigger than many of the others I'd seen so far. "It's huge," I noted to Chet as we skimmed along, scouting for dangers. IR scans indicated no body heat signatures, though I'd learned not to be careless about that.

"Indeed," he said. "I now understand why some are so much bigger than others. They've been growing for longer."

"This..." Dllllizzzz said over the comm. "Here... I was... Here..."

Again, it was more than she normally said, and got Shiver excited. I was focused, however, on the ruins I could make out at the fragment's center, and I navigated toward them.

"Yeah, I remember this place," Peg said. "We visited it when it first drifted into our region a few years back."

"That's right, Captain," Maksim said. "So why are we here again, Spin?"

"Historical investigations," I said. "Chet here is an archaeologist."

"A right noble profession, my good man," Chet said. "Ancient artifacts can tell us much about ourselves!"

"Uh, I guess," Maksim said. "But—"

"Leave it be, Maksim." Peg cut him off. "Their reasons are their own. The rest of us will search for salvage while we're here."

I narrowed my eyes. Peg didn't seem the type to let our reasons be "our own."

“Spin and I will need time to study those ruins directly at the center,” Chet said. “I’m circling them on your monitors.”

“Dlilllizzzz is vibrating uncomfortably,” Shiver said over the comm. “Though she’s excited, I think she doesn’t want to land. She feels... anxious? Maybe the two of us should stay up and keep watch.”

“Fine by me,” Peg said. “Maksim and I will stick near, Spin, while you do your...archaeology.”

Our group landed in a ruined courtyard, while the two resonants stayed in the air. There wasn’t a lot left of most of the ruins—fallen walls, the outlines of buildings. A few somewhat-intact stone structures.

I popped the canopy and climbed out, meeting Peg on the ground. “This place is old,” she said. “Not a lot of wind in here, and no rain, so things don’t weather much. If something looks this bad, it’s probably seen thousands of years.”

Chet and I shared a glance, then started toward one of the mostly intact structures, helmets under our arms.

“Doesn’t look too promising, Captain,” Maksim muttered from behind. “This place must have been picked over hundreds of times.”

“Agreed,” Peg said, “but keep growing *delens* just in case. We’re here to keep our promise to Spin.”

I remembered the structure ahead—it had been injected into my mind by the previous step on the Path. We walked up to it, and directly inside I found my first surprise. The wall behind the small foyer had a faded old mural on it—and the figures it depicted were most certainly human.

“Amazing,” Chet breathed. He rushed up to it and leaned in close. “Our own people, Miss Nightshade. All these years, I never found any ruins that I could identify as human...”

I couldn’t make out much of the mural. Just some figures holding baskets, maybe?

“I could not guess at the culture,” Chet whispered. He reached out to the mural, then paused—perhaps not wanting to touch it and further contribute to its degradation. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t remember much about where we came from. Our homeworld. I must have once known...”

“Earth,” I said. “Humankind left there a few centuries before you were even born. It’s lost now. Vanished.”

Together, we moved farther into the structure. The roof had long since fallen in, so we didn’t lack for light—and from the refuse on the floor, it seemed the place had been ransacked over the years, and had possibly been in a firefight.

I felt an...eerie, haunted sense. There were so many signs of life, but no people. We found the portal in the last room, built straight into the wall, the characteristic flowing lines carved into it. But this one was cracked down the middle. Broken. Would it still work?

I glanced at Chet, who lingered in the doorway. “Courage,” he said, stepping forward. “I am an explorer—it is what I decided to be. I can face these secrets...”

He joined me beside the portal. I touched it, opened up my cytonic senses, and sought answers. At first nothing happened. This portal appeared to be damaged, unusable. But I pushed a little more, using the subtle care I’d been practicing, and...yes, I could feel them inside. The memories...

Everything around me faded to flimsy transparency. I remained in the ruins physically—I could feel the broken wall beside me—but they had been overlaid by a vision of the belt as it had existed long ago.

Chet breathed out, turning around. The lightburst was tiny in the distance, little more than a star. The sky was dark, and I counted maybe two dozen fragments floating in the expanse. So this seemed to be the ancient past, like the previous vision.

Our current fragment was much smaller in the past—plus it was empty of structures save for the portal, which stood free and whole, not cracked. It was smaller too, lending further credence to the theory that the portals grew a little—with memories—whenever cytonics used them as transfer points between dimensions.

Moments after the vision began, people popped into existence directly in front of the portal. I stepped away from them in surprise. Humans? They were talking, though I couldn’t understand the language.

“Can you make out any of that?” Chet asked.



“Afraid not,” I said, circling them. They wore robes, and something was kind of familiar about the headdress one was wearing. “I once saw a drawing of Gilgamesh in a book from Old Earth, and he wore clothing and a beard like that.” I pointed to one of the men. “Maybe they’re from somewhere near his civilization?”

Chet hopped back from the portal as something else materialized in front of it. Stones? Yes, a pile of building materials. People began using them to construct something.

“This wasn’t their first visit here,” I said, feeling it was true. There were...sensations to the vision, not just sights. “They want to build a shrine, I think.”

Chet and I watched as time sped up, and walls sprang into existence. The people became blurs, erecting the very structure that Chet and I were standing in. They carved delicate art into the walls, then painted everything with vibrant colors.

Why put something so nice in this strange place? Time slowed again, and the humans—it seemed the construction had taken weeks, maybe months—gathered together out front. Chet and I joined them and saw another fragment swinging closer. This bore a group of people in vibrant red robes. They had pale violet skin, growths like horns, and pure white hair. People from ReDawn...Alanik’s homeworld.

“I know those people,” I told Chet. “They’re the UrDail. The one I met said they’d known humans in the past.”

“How far in the past?” Chet asked, rubbing his chin. “These humans wear ancient clothing.”

“Scud,” I said. “Could this be first contact? The first time humans met with aliens? I thought that didn’t happen until we were in the space age.”

Except Hesho had also told me that the kitsen people had met with humans in Japan centuries before either achieved space travel. They’d traveled using cytonics. Like these, it seemed.

In front of us, the humans greeted the UrDail—who stepped over to our fragment—and I realized this probably wasn’t first contact. The two groups looked familiar with one another, so their first encounters must have

happened earlier. Now the humans had built some kind of meeting hall. It wasn't a shrine, I realized as we followed the people in. It was a place where they sat together at tables, trying to...

Trying to figure out one another's languages perhaps? Yes, they were writing words, gesturing, explaining to one another. Time sped up again, and I counted dozens of meetings in a matter of minutes—each time the two fragments aligned. I think I even saw some UrDail visit Earth through the portal, while some humans left on the UrDail fragment.

Then...the humans stopped coming.

An alignment happened and the UrDail arrived, but no humans were there to meet them. That occurred several more times, then eventually the UrDail stopped visiting as well.

"So..." I said. "What does this tell us about our powers?"

Chet frowned, inspecting the mural in the vision—which was colorful and vibrant then. "Alien species began meeting in the nowhere. Mixing. But then it ended. Why?"

That...had happened with the kitsen too, hadn't it? Hesho said their cytonics had vanished for some reason. As I was considering this, a woman appeared out of the wall. She was middle-aged, with tan skin and colorful robes. I followed her as she walked out of the building, then over to the nearby edge of the fragment. There she settled down, looking out at the expanse.

Time passed. Months, maybe years. And still she sat there, as if waiting for something. Finally she rose and walked past us.

"Who are you?" I asked.

And the impression returned, *I am the only one who was not killed by the beast.*

Wait. *Wait.* Had she replied?

I followed her back into the building as she walked up to the portal. There she rested her hand—and lines in the stone began to spiral and flourish out at her touch.

*I feel your questions, the impression said. It is my talent. Though I do not know any of you, I leave my answers in the portal.*

“What happened?” I asked. “To the cytonics?”

*A beast. Raised by an alien species who had technological marvels.*

I saw something in my mind then. An assembly of thousands of cytonics—of a hundred different races—gathering to fight...something dark, something rising from a blackness, but with a set of piercing white eyes.

*It...destroyed them, the cytonic said. We fought. We won. But the price was so high...*

“How?” I asked. “How did you win?”

*We made it become real, she said. I do not know how. I survived...and those who did know how...were consumed.* She lowered her hand. She’d...inscribed her memories into the portal, which...were now reaching me somehow?

Chet walked up behind me. “Time is unnatural in the nowhere, but this is strange even by its standards,” he said. “I...have no idea what to make of this.”

I felt the vision begin to fade. It was coming to the end of its memories.

“Wait,” I said to the woman. “You kept your memories while living in the nowhere. How?”

*Why would I lose my memories?* the impression returned.

“That’s an attribute of this place,” I said.

*Not in our time. You face a beast, like ours.*

“Not one beast,” I said. “Thousands. Millions of them.”

*Then you are doomed.*

“No. There *has* to be a way!”

*Find the memories...of the man who will come... Find the memories...of the man named Jason Write.*

Then a different sort of impression came upon me, as had happened during the previous vision. I understood it better because I was stronger in my powers, better at listening. It felt like dozens, maybe hundreds, of minds reaching to me from within the stone.

*Further...they encouraged me. Even further...*

They presented for me something like a wall. I forced my mind against it and could not get through.

*Stronger. But not harder.*

*I don't understand!* I sent.

*You are not a tool to strike. Not a rock to bludgeon.*

*What am I?* I asked.

*You are a star.*

And a light kindled inside me. A pure white light, the power of the nowhere. I became a flaming sword, and when I shoved, my mind *pierced* the barrier.

*Good... Good... Continue.*

A location popped into my head. Another portal? It was in what appeared to be a large building, filled with boxes? I frowned.

“Scrud,” Chet said.

“You recognize the place?” I asked, turning toward him.

“Indeed I do, Spensa,” he said, then took a deep breath. “That, I’m afraid, is the portal in the middle of Surehold, seat of Superiority power in this region of the belt.”

# 25

There would be time later to think over what I'd seen. For now, I burst through the open doorway of the ruins, searching for Peg. I didn't have to hunt for long; she was leaning against a crumbling wall just outside, arms held before her, claws out. Even when lounging, the tenasi looked predatory.

"You saw something," she said. "You're cytonic, aren't you? Both of you."

"I... Yes," I said, glancing to Chet.

"Do you know about the Path of Elders?" he asked Peg.

"Never heard that term before," she said, "but these old ruins...they have their own memories. Anyone can feel that. And I've been told about cytonics." She pushed off the wall and stood upright. "This has to do with your mission? The one that's so important that you two had to steal a ship from us?"

"Yes," I told Peg. "And there's more. Tell me about your plans to assault Surehold."

She narrowed her eyes at me.

"Please, Peg," I said. "I need to know. If the pirates are afraid to fight the Superiority—if they don't want to risk the good things they have now—how do we persuade them?"

"We?" Peg said. "You're joining in?"

I glanced at Chet, who nodded.

"Provisionally, yes," I said.

Peg grinned. “Words. Well, we don’t need to persuade the pirates—not individually. We merely need to get my sons to follow me again.”

“Your sons?” Chet said. “They turned against you!”

“Yeah,” Peg said. “They lead the two largest pirate factions. I’ll admit, I didn’t expect *both* of my sons to grow enough *muluns* to rebel. After we all left Surehold the first time, I tried to get everyone to attack it. We had a small initial clash, but our people were frightened by that, and disorganized. When my coalition collapsed, my sons took away some of my strongest forces to start their factions. Makes a mother proud.”

“Proud? That they rebelled?”

“Exactly!” she said. “They were incredibly bold. Overthrowing their own mother? They were barely adults! Ah, it was great. But it’s inconvenient, so we have to win them back. My eldest—Gremm—has been champion for a year now. Leads the faction called the Jolly Rogers. An Earth term, no?”

“I believe so,” Chet said.

“Well, you’ll probably get to meet my son’s forces soon. The moment word of your skill reaches them, I suspect Gremm will send a raiding party to attack us. They’ll be growing *delens* to know the truth—and I’ll expect you to show them.”

“I’m eager for it,” I said.

“I doubt Gremm will join the raid. But afterward I can demand a contest between you and him—and he’ll accept. I know my son. And though he’s the best pilot among us, he’s nothing compared to you. If you defeat him, he will be forced to grow the *tagao*.”

“Which means?” I asked.

“A very rare fruit, meaning he feels submissive to his parents. If you defeat him, he will listen to me again.”

“You *sure* about that?”

“Absolutely,” Peg said. “It is our way.”

I didn’t point out that she’d been surprised by their betrayal, so I had my doubts. But I was willing to give it a try.

“What about his brother?” Chet asked.

“Semm leads a different faction,” she said. “He’ll return to me too, if my faction claims the championship. Trust me.”

Yeah, that sounded too convenient to me. There was more to this—Peg still had her secrets.

She watched me a moment longer, then started through the ruins toward our ships. “We should be returning,” she said. “I expect a raid at any time, and I don’t want to leave the others too short-staffed.”

“Well?” I asked Chet as she wandered off. “Did you know we’d have to get into Surehold itself?”

“I suspected,” he admitted. “The portal there is one of the largest and oldest in the region. I had hoped it wouldn’t be necessary...but at least we have a path forward.”

“Assuming we can trust Peg’s plan.”

“She seems to trust it,” he said. “Come, we *should* return to our ship. You remember what happened last time after we saw one of these?”

Yeah. Our entire fragment had been destroyed in a collision. Perhaps it had been a coincidence, but I found myself hurrying after Chet just in case. We gathered Maksim, and soon the four of us were lifting off to join the resonants and start back toward our home base.

“You two appear unusually solemn,” M-Bot said as we fell into formation. “It worked, I assume? You again saw the past?”

“Indeed, AI,” Chet said. “We *kind of* contacted a cytonic person in the past.”

“Uh...” M-Bot said. “Clarification please?”

“She could feel my questions somehow,” I explained, “in her time—and left answers for me. Or maybe she just heard the general curiosity of all who came after her. Either way, I think we know what happened to the kitsen cytonics—and why there was a sudden dearth of contact between Earth and aliens after some initial interactions in ancient times.”

“Really? What?”

“War,” I said. “With a delver.”

“We don’t know it was a delver,” Chet said. “But it did seem to have been some kind of...delverlike entity. The cytonics of the galaxy—those

that had contacted one another—gathered to fight it. And...not many survived.”

“They fought a *single* entity?” M-Bot said.

“And won,” Chet said, “by somehow making it real. But there were great casualties.”

“And we now face...more than one,” M-Bot said. “Way more than one.”

“Yes,” I said, leaning forward in my seat. “There was something else. No loss of memories in the nowhere back then. It’s a more recent development.”

“It’s connected,” Chet said. “And the answers are at Surehold. Some of them at least.”

“In the memories of a man named Jason Write,” I said, frowning.

“Jason Write?” M-Bot said. “Superiority historical archives list him as the human who initiated first contact with the greater galaxy after accidentally discovering he was cytonic. He...kicked off the expansion of humankind into the galaxy, and indirectly caused the First Human War of conquest.”

I nodded absently, thinking about that ancient cytonic who had communicated with us. The feelings of exhaustion and loneliness that had permeated her. I felt that something had *sparked* inside me. Or...well, the spark had always been there. Now it burned brighter.

“Chet,” I said. “Do your powers feel different?”

“Indeed!” he said. “They talked to me about using my mind to ‘see’ around myself! I feel that with practice, I won’t just have an instinct for the fragments. I might be able to see into buildings, or around corners, or... well, it seems incredible!”

“I learned something else,” I said softly. “But I don’t know what it means yet.”

*You are a star.*

“Hey,” Maksim’s voice said over the comm, “the rest of you registering that figure down there? At my nine.”



“Odd to see someone,” Shiver said, “out so openly, not hiding. If we were recruiting, they’d be in trouble.”

I checked out the window. A solitary figure stood on a ridge on a distant fragment. It appeared to be a heklo—the distance was far enough that it made it difficult to tell. And though I couldn’t see for certain, I could feel a coldness and a pressure against my mind. I was positive the figure had white glowing eyes.

“You feel that?” Chet asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s one of them. At least they didn’t find a way to destroy the fragment this time.”

“Still worries me,” Chet said. “I had hoped that we’d lost them these last few weeks. It is difficult for the delvers to project attention this far out. But now they have located us again. Hopefully this doesn’t lead to difficulties.”

I shivered. Soon we were past it, the figure dwindling in the distance. My comm started flashing though. A direct call from Peg.

“Yes, Captain?” I said.

“What did you see,” she asked, “in those ruins?”

“Why?” I asked her.

“Something feels odd,” she said. “About that figure we just passed. About this entire excursion. I answered your questions about my plans. Now answer mine. What did you see?”

“We saw the past,” I admitted. “Memories, like you said. We’re investigating a way to fight the delvers—and we got a message from a woman who encountered something like them long ago.”

“*Fight the delvers?*” Peg said.

“Yeah...” I said.

“If it’s any consolation,” Chet said, “we would prefer to find some way to placate or reconcile with them. For now, however, we must continue our quest—and visit the portal at Surehold to find the memories hidden therein.”

“Well, our goals overlap,” Peg said, “so I can’t say I’m sorry about that part. But fighting the delvers...I suppose if you’re cytonic, maybe you can

manage it? I knew this one dione in the security force. They left soon after arriving, because they kept...changing, to look like different people. The heads of the Superiority pulled them out the moment they heard of it.”

Changing shape? I’d never done anything like that.

“A cytonic talent,” Chet said. “Projecting illusions into the minds of others—making oneself appear different, even feel different. It works on anyone in here, though I’ve heard that in the somewhere it only works on other cytonics.”

Actually... I felt a chill. I *had* heard of that happening. Someone had done it to my father—making him see the wrong things. I was coming to understand more and more that different cytonics...they could do different things. I could hear the stars and teleport. Chet could extend his life span and “see” great distances with his powers.

Peg dropped off the line, and M-Bot had a chance to speak. “Why didn’t the delvers grab one of the members of your team and turn *them* into a glowing-eyed thing?” he asked. “Peg and Maksim were closer to you than that heklo.”

“Gathering a large number of people together repels them,” Chet said. “Particularly if those people see themselves as a group. My theory is that the delvers need someone who is as alone as possible, and someone who doesn’t view themselves as belonging.”

I dwelled on what we’d seen, and found it more difficult to make sense of it all this time. In fact, I had to admit that—as we neared home—I was glad when a more mundane danger cropped up: an emergency announcement that a group of starfighters from an enemy faction was approaching the Broadsider base at high speed.

# 26

**A**s soon as our base came into view, I hit my overburn and pulled ahead of the others. I could see the destructor fire spraying through the nowhere, beautiful and bright. My body came alive, and my mind—which had been reeling from what I’d experienced—snapped to full alert.

This was what I’d been made for.

“Hang on, Chet,” I said, and we screamed into the fight, flying to the sound of wind on wings and boosters roaring. It had taken us precious minutes to arrive, and I counted three of our fighters already locked up, drifting aimlessly. Scud. With ten total fighters, and the five of us gone, the remaining two stragglers were facing overwhelming odds.

M-Bot highlighted enemy ships, friendlies, and downed friendlies on my proximity display. By the markings on the enemy fighters, these were from the Jolly Rogers. The faction led by Peg’s son Gremm—and the one she’d expected to send a raid to test my abilities.

Excellent.

M-Bot suggested a few targets—circling starfighters that were flying slower than the others and one that had just taken a hit to its shield. As much as I wanted a challenge—and to go for the stronger enemies first—that could lead to my team getting overwhelmed.

So, steeling myself, I took one of M-Bot’s suggestions and swooped in behind a pair of fighters that were tailing Gibsey, one of our pilots from Flintlock Flight. The two enemy pilots barely responded to my arrival. One

swung a little to the side so that if I fired, I'd risk my stray shots hitting my ally.

For a brief second, I was confused. That was it?

*I'm used to fighting Superiority ships that recognize me as an enemy ace, I realized. They highlight me in battle, devoting extra resources to me.* But this was my first time fighting rival pirates. They had come to test me, but they didn't seem to expect too much.

Time to send them my calling card. I sniped the one who had moved to the side, each of my shots landing with precision. The pilot belatedly panicked, pulling up—and slammed square into my next shot. You always want to pull up. It's instinct, even in space when there's no ground below.

I buzzed around the now-frozen enemy ship, firing at the second ship tailing Gibsey—which was the ship that M-Bot had highlighted as having a weakened shield. My shots rattled the enemy pilot, who broke off and dodged to the right.

“You,” I whispered, “shall know the taste of my steel. And I shall know the taste of your blood.”

Yes, those kinds of phrases still slipped out now and then. No, I wasn't embarrassed. They helped me focus.

I wove after the ship as they dodged around the fragment. They crossed underneath, with me tight behind them, then came up around the other side on a pivot. I could sense their increasing panic as I used my light-lance to swing around more quickly, my GravCaps easily compensating for the g-forces.

My prey cut one direction, then the other. It was an ostensibly smart move—if they jerked around randomly, I couldn't anticipate where they'd be. Except, as with pulling up, people who *think* they're acting randomly rarely are. Cobb had drilled this into my brain time and time again. Instead of “random” motions, we practiced sequences of maneuvers deliberately designed to frustrate enemies.

Training always trumped haphazardness. My prey jerked back and forth, and I'm sure it *felt* random to them—but I picked them off with three expert shots anyway. Chet let out a whoop, and I left the enemy ship frozen and

swerved into the firefight. Here, I got in an admittedly lucky shot on a ship that M-Bot highlighted, but I wasn't going to complain. Three "kills" in under five minutes?

Scud, it felt good to be back in the cockpit. Fighting alongside friends again. Doing what I was meant to do.

Nearby, I noticed some of the enemy ships forming up into a proper flight. "Cutlass Flight," I said, "track my position. I'm about to give you a group of juicy targets."

The four enemy ships spun around, orienting toward me. Working together was a good idea, but these obviously hadn't drilled on ideal ship distance. As I'd recently taught the Broadsiders, when you flew in a formation, you wanted to be just far enough away from one another to protect against IMP blasts.

I went barreling toward them, slamming my overburn. They landed a few shots on me, which was fine. As I darted through the middle of the quartet, I hit my IMP. They reacted too slowly, and I caught three of the four—which M-Bot obligingly painted on the display for me—dropping their shields.

As I'd suggested, Peg and the members of Cutlass Flight focused on these ships. Sprays of destructor fire lit the air behind me, and I found myself grinning. The fighting here reminded me of something...

*Training with the holographic projectors, I realized. That was the last time I flew without fearing for my life.*

"That was quite the stunt, Spin," Peg said over the comm. "Can't decide if you're growing *muluns* or *hemels*."

"That's nothing, Captain," I said, spinning into evasive maneuvers as someone took shots at me. "You should see me do something like that when we're fighting for our lives. It's *way* more stupid then."

"I can imagine," she said. "You need a wingmate?"

"Nah. You and Maksim might want to go help Gibsey though. He's somehow picked up two *more* tails."

I still had my own tail. M-Bot helpfully pointed out this was the one ship from a moment ago that I *hadn't* IMPed. Which meant they had a

shield and I didn't.

Huh. They were sticking to me pretty well. In fact—

A couple bolts of blue destructor light grazed my canopy, inches from connecting. Scud. This one was actually *good*.

My grin widened. I slammed on my overburn, sat back in my seat, and really got into it. There was no way I'd be able to restore my shield to duel them properly—that required precious seconds sitting still. So instead I focused on outflying my enemy.

The next few minutes were a glorious chase through the battlefield, swerving and swooping, light-lancing around fragments, buzzing the Broadsider base. That tail stayed on me, as if proving a point. They soon left off shooting though.

*Waiting for the perfect shot, eh?* I thought. *Well, I'm not going to give you one.*

I pulled up for a while, soaring into the pink-white sky. Then I turned and dove. My new ship's GravCaps absorbed the worst of the g-forces, but I was still slammed with them as I accelerated downward. That had me grinning. Yes, g-forces suck, but at this point they were an old friend. All the blood pushing to the back of my body, threatening to claim my eyesight—then my consciousness...

I soared past my tail, then pulled up at just the right moment. A glance at the monitor showed me Chet's head rolling on his neck. He shook himself, coming alert. Seemed I'd knocked him out in that maneuver. I'd have to be a little more careful.

Yet even despite all of that, my enemy kept with me. They *were* good. So I roared back into the snarl of fighting ships—and then started blasting an enemy ship that had been gunning for Shiver, knocking out its shields. I then took to the side, drawing a bead on another ship, and fired and locked it up.

My tail finally unloaded on me, firing wildly instead of waiting for the right moment.

Great, now I just—

My ship jolted. The control panel went dark and the controls locked up. I found myself hovering forward at a steady pace, nothing working, as that enemy ace buzzed my ship. Scud, I'd been hit. I checked Chet's vitals on my monitor—he was fine, by the numbers—so I sat back in my seat, then laughed.

“Spensa?” M-Bot asked. “Oh my. Is the stress causing your emotions to erupt irrationally? Oh! I've felt that now. Um, what do I say? Let's see... Humm...”

“I'm great,” I said, wiping my eyes.

“No, no. I need the correct words...”

I stretched forward in my seat, trying to get a visual on that ace. Fighting was fun, but knowing there was someone in here who could *match* me? That was even *more* exciting.

“Ah!” M-Bot said. “I've got it. Spensa. Feel better, please.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling. “I already do.”

“Success! I'm going to remember that one.”

“Chet, how are you feeling?” I asked him.

“Enthused,” he said, his voice wan, “but nauseous and...embarrassed. I fear I lost consciousness earlier.”

“It happens to all of us,” I said. “No need to be embarrassed. You should have seen me on my first days in the centrifuge back home.”

“Well,” he said, “I know you've said I was a pilot, but those experiences are lost to me. My current disposition is one of profound respect for the ground, I must admit.”

“I'll try to avoid towing you into any more of these,” I said. “M-Bot, who was that enemy pilot?”

“Peg's son, Gremm,” M-Bot said. “She indicated he wouldn't join the fight, but by the markings on that ship, she was wrong.”

So I'd had my first brush with the champion. I grinned. Though he'd beaten me, that hadn't been a true duel. I'd lost my shield fighting his companions.

He would see my *true* potential when we faced off. “How are you, M-Bot?” I asked, turning and scanning the sky, trying to gauge the progress of

the battle. “That hit didn’t fry you or anything?”

“Fortunately,” M-Bot said, “the modifications we made to insulate my core systems appear to have worked.”

“I’m glad.”

“It honestly wouldn’t take too much effort to insulate all of the systems,” he continued, “so we won’t get locked up in fights like this.”

“What would be the sport in that?” Chet asked.

“Sport?” M-Bot said. “It’s not a game.”

“It is though,” I said. “As long as everyone plays by the same rules, nobody has to die.”

“From what I understand of the interactions between sapient beings,” M-Bot said, “someone is eventually going to seek an extra advantage. I’m shocked it hasn’t happened already, regardless of what Peg indicated.”

“Maybe,” I said. “You ever study small-group battles between tribes of early humans?”

“No.”

“You should. I think you’d be surprised by what kinds of rules a society will follow, when the stakes are different.”

Smaller groups of hunter-gatherers on Old Earth had rarely engaged in lethal combat. Their numbers had been too small, their communities too tight-knit. Yes, occasionally someone had died during their conflicts, but mostly the battles had been about boasting and intimidation.

Cobb had used this lesson to indicate that human nature wasn’t to fight and kill, which was why we needed to drill and train. But now I found something liberating in the idea that flying, the thing I loved, didn’t *have* to only be about killing. It could be about proving myself—to myself.

Behind, the remaining four enemy ships decided to pull out. Cutlass Flight’s timely return had let us win the day. I waited, pensive, as Peg and her son negotiated terms for the return of their disabled ships. They then began reactivating those vessels, a process that would take a few minutes.

Maksim finally arrived to fetch me, hauling my sorry rear back to the base, where the ground crews waited with some of the pilots who had already landed. A set of docking light-lances pulled me down, and I hit the



manual release on my canopy, then cranked it open. As Chet and I climbed out, I braced myself for a lecture. I could hear Cobb's voice ranting about how reckless I'd been in that fight. He always drilled good behavior, even when doing simulations.

Instead I climbed out to furious cheers and applause. Led by Peg herself, who—instead of berating me—grabbed me in an enveloping hug as I dropped to the ground.

"Four kills?" she shouted. "And three assists? Kid, you practically won that fight on your own!"

"The Jolly Rogers were sent running!" Maksim said. "You have no idea how good that feels!"

"We have our chance," Peg said. "Gremm was impressed. He's willing to duel you officially tomorrow."

The others cheered again.

Scud. I'd been shot down, and they were cheering me? And her son thought I was worthy?

I grinned widely. How long had it been since I'd been this...well, excited after a fight? How long since I'd heard such joy from my flightmates? Last time I could remember was when I saved the DDF base from annihilation by grabbing the bomb. But those cheers had had an edge. A tension. Those had been cheers of relief.

These people were simply happy. I let their enthusiasm infuse me. It was an incredible feeling. And it was merely the beginning—because tomorrow, I *was* going to become pirate champion and give Peg her chance at uniting the factions.

# INTERLUDE

Floating.

I became partially aware. Not awake, but aware. I was in the place where I had no shape, no senses other than my cytonic ones. I... remembered lying down, in my own room at the Broadsider base, after the skirmish.

It had been a full day. I'd fallen asleep. And now I searched outward, as I'd done on other nights. Seeking. Wishing.

*Jorgen*...I tried to find him, but felt like I was screaming into an empty void. I couldn't feel *anything*. Like...like I was building a bonfire in a dark place, but with each new log the increased light only reaffirmed that the blackness extended into infinity.

I'd failed at this often enough recently that I nearly faded into unconsciousness. I had important work ahead of me; I would need to get my rest.

And yet...

Something felt off about my experiences lately in this sleeping realm. Yes. This was wrong. I hadn't been able to see it before. But with a few more test shouts, I thought I picked out what was wrong here. My mental shouts were vanishing *too* quickly. As if I wasn't screaming into a void, so much as into pillows.

Was...someone *blocking* me?

Scud. Was *that* why I hadn't been able to find Jorgen?

I growled. Well, I made the mental equivalent of a growl. As one does. My soul *sparked* in the darkness.

I pressed forward through the void, feeling... Yes. A dampening. Like a cloud all around me, invisible. In the strange ways of the nowhere, it had always been there—literally on top of me—but I hadn't been able to perceive it. Now I struggled forward, pushing. Fighting with my arms.

*No, I thought. I'm not a stone. I'm not even a bonfire. I'm a star.*

My essence, my soul, exploded with light—burning away the haze that surrounded me. No longer was I *nothing* in this place. I was a light, a glowing presence, a sphere of burning whiteness.

I used my ability to connect, to see, and sensed a presence ahead. It was easy, now that I'd escaped. Was that Jorgen? I latched onto it and *pulled* myself through.

I appeared in the somewhere, as I had before—illusory, ephemeral. But I hadn't found Jorgen.

I'd found my enemies.

To my human eyes, Winzik looked virtually identical to Nuluba, though his exoskeleton was a deeper green. Varvax didn't usually wear clothing, but he had on an official-ish sash. He sat in a large marble chair, carved intricately and inlaid with silver. I supposed that if one had an exoskeleton, cushioned seating wouldn't be relevant.

The room was circular, lavishly paneled in wood, and had the feel of an office. A group of tenasi, with the same predatory air as Peg, was making a presentation to Winzik. They *did* wear clothing, and I recognized a military uniform instantly. Some things seemed pretty universal across species—and judging by the ranks of medals and badges on their jackets, these were admirals and generals.

A military briefing for the acting leader of the Superiority, I supposed. The screen, fortunately, didn't show Detritus—but an unfamiliar planet, red and green. I couldn't read any of the writing around it, and didn't have my pin to translate, so I couldn't figure out what it was.

"It's ReDawn," a voice said in English from behind me. "Funny you wouldn't recognize it, considering the face you wore most of the time you

were with us.”

I spun. Brade sat in a chair beside me. She wore her dark hair in a sharp buzz cut, and even through the uniform I could see she had muscles—the kind of build you rarely saw outside the more fanatical soldiers at the gym. She was spinning a pen between her fingers, watching me with an almost uninterested stare.

Winzik turned in his seat to glance back at her, barking an order in a language I didn’t know.

“Oh, stuff your complaints, Winzik,” Brade said, still spinning the pencil. “She’s here. Finally broke out of her cage. Took you long enough, Alanik—or Spensa, I guess. I expected you to make more noise inside that barrier. Do you know how much attention it required to keep it up?”

“How?” I demanded. “How did you manage that?”

“Took a little instruction from our new friends,” Brade said. She could see me, I realized. Without a reflective surface. “Unlocked a few abilities I’d been practicing.”

Winzik ordered the generals out and walked over, exoskeleton hands making circular motions as he spoke. Despite the language barrier, I could recognize his mannerisms—in fact, I could practically hear him saying “my, my” and “how aggressive” in his persnickety tone.

“The delvers think they can handle you,” Brade said. “I told them otherwise. You’re blunt, Spensa. I like that about you. No subtlety. You just go crashing through whatever stands between you and your goals.”

“I was subtle enough to fool you,” I snapped, projecting the thoughts at her. And with my growing powers, I caught a flutter of emotions she tried to hide. Shame, anger. She had trained with me and had never figured out what I really was. Until I’d handed her the truth, for her to stomp on.

Scud, I’d been so naive.

Winzik was saying something else. I wished I could figure out what it was.

“He wants me to trap your mind,” Brade said. “I’m not sure I can do it. The people I’ve been practicing on are far weaker than you. I won’t flinch this time though.”

Her mind slammed into mine, crushing against me. I immediately felt like I was in a box—that was shrinking. I lashed out, panicked, furious. I summoned my anger, as I had last time we'd clashed. And I threw it at her.

As she'd warned, Brade didn't waver. She was expecting my counterattack.

So I started to glow. I stoked what was inside me, the powerful light. The brilliance that was my soul. I felt Brade's surprise, though she didn't want to project the emotion. She was shocked. She...thought I was like a delver, in ways that frightened her.

And something else heard.

*I see you!*

The voice was distant, but *loud*. A cytonic shout vibrated through me, then something slammed into Brade, making her gasp and lose her focus. It was raw, this voice, as if untrained. If I was a sword, it was a bludgeon—a big one.

I flared with light and broke through Brade's box, and together with the new voice we shoved her back, then escaped into the nowhere.

I was chased by that extremely loud voice. It had saved me, but it seemed a monster of some sort. I spun toward it, not wanting to put my back to it as it crashed into me. And...

...hugged me?

*Jorgen?* I thought.

*Where have you been?* he thought at me. *Why haven't you contacted me? Spin, it's been weeks!*

*I tried!* I said, forcing my mind to visualize him. For the moment we floated together in the void, our essences touching. Like we were two swimmers in a deep, vast, endless ocean clinging to one another.

*I'm sorry I didn't contact you,* I said. *Brade did something.*

*Brade?* he asked.

*The one who was holding me when you arrived,* I said. *How did you find me?*

*I've been practicing,* he explained. *I can't hyperjump, no matter how hard I try. But Alanik says that's not uncommon. Cytonics have different*

*specialties. She says I can learn hyperjumping—that every one of us can technically learn every talent, but for some of us there are individual talents that are very difficult. We all have weaknesses and strengths.*

*Wait, I said. Alanik?*

*It's complicated, he said. We're holding out, trying to gather help. But tell me about you. Spensa, you're glowing. Like a star. I could see you even from a distance!*

*I've been practicing too, I said.*

*Are you a pirate queen yet?*

He said it with such fondness. There were so many images wrapped up in what he'd said—this communication had much more *depth* than ordinary words. For example, I knew instantly that he was joking—but also a little serious.

He loved *my* love of stories. He imagined me in one of those stories, and was completely confident in me. More confident than I was of myself. Saints...that was so good to hear. So good to know. His picture of me was of someone courageous, resourceful, and inspiring.

That was *not* what I deserved for how I'd treated him in our first weeks knowing each other. Fortunately, I could also feel Jorgen responding to my own picture of him. Upright, honest, caring. A leader, the best one I'd known.

The moment was as perfect a one as I'd ever felt. The two of us sharing our idealized versions of one another—knowing we could never live up to them, yet knowing it didn't matter. Because by simply being near one another, we resonated and became a little more—a little better—for the knowledge, support, and trust.

Then it was ruined as eyes started to appear around us. Bright white holes, the attention of the delvers. It wasn't my glow that attracted them. It was Jorgen. Scud, he was *loud*.

*Go, Jorgen, I said as the eyes surrounded us. I'll contact you later, once their attention dies down.*

I felt his essence brush mine. I *felt* his affection, his passion. But then he was gone.

I turned to face the delvers. I kept thinking that with effort I could get through to them. After all, Chet had explained they were all the same individual. Not a group mind, but somehow all identical. So if I'd been able to change the mind of one, shouldn't I be able to do the same for the others?

I'd failed at this before, but I had to try again. After all, it had taken three attempts to get a ship. So, as the eyes surrounded me, I tried to project a sensation of smallness.

I tried to shrink us all down, to narrow our perspective. As their minds touched mine, I tried to show them. Infinity went both ways—we could be as expansive as a universe, but we could be as small as a mote.

I showed them what I saw. Maksim, with his goofy smile and ready, welcoming manner. Shiver, who did so well understanding people who were very different from her. Nuluba, who so desperately wanted to make up for the ways the Superiority had wronged the peoples of the galaxy.

*See us*, I told them. *See that we are alive.*

*We know*, they sent back. *Oh, we know.*

They just didn't care.

In that moment I saw things as *they* did. Yes, they'd initially refused to accept that all the noises in the somewhere were alive. Then I'd changed one of them. When I'd done that, the rest had responded *against* what I'd done.

In a way, it didn't matter which one of them I'd changed. Because as soon as I'd done it, the others had put up defenses. Like how you might get off one sniper shot at people in a group, but then the rest would duck for cover.

I would *never* persuade another delver, not like I'd done before. Because now they hated us even *more*, knowing we were alive. Because now we weren't just random annoyances. We were *intentionally* trying to bring them pain. We were dangerous.

We needed to be exterminated.

The horror of that idea made me flee from before them. And I was getting good at hiding. I pretended to fade away, to sleep, but then quested

out with my ever-strengthening ability to listen. I thought I'd heard something back there, and was rewarded with a voice.

*My, my, Brade said to the delvers, sending Winzik's words into the nowhere. Was that painful? You see, she is too difficult to control. They all are. You saw how another came? They are multiplying. Getting louder.*

That referred to Jorgen and the noise he'd made in rescuing me. Oh, scud.

I felt the delvers mull over his words, and I remembered what Brade had said. She'd wanted me to be "loud" as I tried to break through the dampening she'd put on me. As if...as if she'd purposely meant to provoke me. So that the delvers would...

*We hear and hurt, the delvers said. But we can extinguish the noises on our own.*

*Can you? Winzik said. My, my. It seems that when you come to our realm, you are confused. You are as unskilled with this place as we are when in yours! You attacked Detritus and Starsight, yet failed to kill even a single cytonic. Many years have passed, and you have failed each time. We multiply. The noise multiplies. I will stop it. If you help me.*

They hated this idea. I could feel their hatred. But also their agreement. *We accept your deal, noise, the delvers said. We will do as you instruct in exchange for you stopping the ones that torment us.*

*Excellent, Winzik sent. So very, very wise of you.*

I felt their deal snap into place. The delvers would work for Winzik. I realized what had happened just as I slid into true unconsciousness—and as a result, nightmares haunted me the entire time I slept.



# **PART FOUR**



# 27

**R**oughly twelve hours later, I flew on a direct course toward the arena, anxious for my duel—and holding a book in my hand.

The arena was a location in the Jolly Rogers' territory—Peg said the anomalies near it made the fighting more interesting. They'd be waiting there for us with the other pirate factions, who would come to watch. Indeed, we'd brought the entire Broadsiders Faction: ground crews flying double or in shuttles. Chet was flying with Nuluba today, in a noncombat tug that had comfortable seats.

I still felt a sense of dread from what I'd experienced the night before. The deal had been made; the delvers would work with Winzik. I needed to find answers, and quickly.

Fortunately, I seemed to be on the best path for that. Win this duel; help Peg take Surehold. Unfortunately, the trip to the arena would take a few hours. When I'd complained in the hangar about the flying time, Maksim had tossed me the book.

A real book, made of paper and everything. I hadn't been intending to read it, but as the flight stretched long—and I let M-Bot take over steering for a little while—I found myself poking into it as a distraction.

It was slow reading, as I had to use my translation pin with its optics on to read the sentences to me in English. At the same time, it was *fascinating*. Not only was physical media like this almost nonexistent on my planet, information from our old ship archives was fragmented. The biggest chunk

that had survived until my time was about the plants and animals of Old Earth, so my schooling had covered that in detail.

But I'd never heard of a "trashy romance novel," as Maksim had named this one. It was written from the perspective of the cambrian species, who had a lot of tentacles and stuff. Their courtship rituals were surprisingly similar to human ones—if way, way more sappy. Or maybe that was the genre.

I didn't really care about the plot; I was more intrigued by this book's nature. It was just...so *fluffy*. The protagonist spent her time romancing three different guys, and her most urgent question was deciding which one to bring with her on vacation.

Like, that was the *entire* conflict. Not the quest to *win* this vacation, but the stress of choosing between the guys. This was what they read, what they enjoyed, in the Superiority? It contained no fighting. I wasn't so ignorant as to think everything *had* to involve battle. There were plenty of great stories about heroes like clever Coyote escaping trouble using his wits instead of his brawn. There were even stories about people building up to a war, then making peace.

Gran-Gran hadn't ever told me a story about people taking a vacation. Part of me thought it was ridiculous. But another part understood. It whispered, "This is what people can focus their attention on if they aren't constantly at war. You learned something living among them: your life is not normal."

This aspect of the characters made them so much more alien than the tentacles. I wanted peace for my people, yes. But to imagine a world without flight training, without the military complex being society's central and most demanding need...

Scud. I couldn't understand it, but I needed to. So I read their romance novel and tried to comprehend.

We flew for some time, and I dug a good quarter of the way through the book, when M-Bot spoke. "You see that fragment?"

I glanced out of the canopy. We had to move slowly for the benefit of the tugs, so we made a leisurely pace through the belt, passing fragments

with a variety of terrain. One down below was a rare ocean fragment. Not the one we'd traversed earlier, but similar.

"I feel something seeing that one," M-Bot said. "I remembered sailing with you and Chet, and it felt...pleasant. Like I was meeting an old friend. Is it strange to feel this now? It's not even the same fragment."

"It's not strange," I said. "Humans often associate feelings with locations. The caverns beneath Detritus sometimes feel more like home to me than the neighborhood where I grew up—and each time I see a cave, I think of them."

"This feeling is...nice," M-Bot said.

"Not going to ask this time what the emotions are for?"

"I'm still wondering that," he said. "But today I just...*like* these feelings. That's all right. Isn't it?"

I smiled. "Yes."

"I used to try to imagine why you liked stories so much," M-Bot said. "At first I thought it was a purely logical response—education through the story as a mnemonic device. Yet your strange reactions baffled me. You didn't treat them as mere education, but as something more."

"I think I understand now. Hearing those stories, being with your grandmother, felt good. And thinking of them again... Well, you remember her voice, don't you? That's like me seeing that fragment and remembering the fun of sailing. It's...warm to me. A machine shouldn't be able to feel warm, but I do."

I shifted in my seat, trying to remember Gran-Gran's voice, as he said. And...I couldn't. I remembered the stories, but her voice was lost to me.

Needing to be distracted, I turned back to my book, and we flew for more...time. I'll admit, I kind of liked the book. I didn't find it trashy at all. Indeed, I actually found myself engaged, almost *excited* to find out who got to go on the vacation. Granted, it helped to imagine the heroine was planning to feed the failed suitors to her pet shark.

It would have been easier if M-Bot hadn't piped up with some observation or another every five minutes. "Hey, Spensa! That fragment is

black and purple, with crystals growing in the ground! I think it comes from a planet like where Shiver lived. What do you think?”

“Don’t know, M-Bot,” I said, turning the page. “Why don’t you scan your databases to find out?”

“Done!” he said. “I think it does!”

“Great,” I said. “Maybe you should catalog the fragments we’ve passed, and see if you can discover what kind of planets they came from.”

“Will do!” he said.

That should take him a while. I smiled fondly, but Saints, this must be what it was like to have a toddler. I probably owed my mother a nice rat sandwich or something—because I’m *pretty* sure I’d had *lots* of questions for her. Often about how to perform a decapitation.

“Hey,” M-Bot said after a few more minutes of silence, “why am I doing this scan again? Is this *busywork*, Spensa?”

I smiled. “Made you look.”

“You humans,” he said. “That is *not* a joke! There’s no punchline!”

“Oh, hush,” I said. “This part is good.”

“I guess you don’t want to hear about Peg’s secret communication then,” he said.

I glanced up. “Secret communication?”

“She’s receiving an encrypted direct call—I assume from a pirate in the Jolly Rogers, judging by the origin of the databurst. Peg obviously doesn’t want anyone to know about the call; it came in on a band that the other Broadsider receivers aren’t attuned to pick up. Her ship apparently has some special equipment. I can only see because of, you know...”

“Espionage AI?”

“Mushroom-locating AI. With supplementary espionage additions.”

A secret call? That *was* odd. Peg tended to be very open about everything she did—she always let the Broadsiders listen in on the negotiations she made, for example.

“Can we eavesdrop?” I asked.

“If I had my old ship’s hardware, that would be easy,” he said. “But I can’t manage it from this ship. Best I can do is tell you the length of the

conversation—and maybe pinpoint the person Peg is talking to.”

“Okay,” I said, a little frustrated. I almost wished he hadn’t said anything at all, rather than teasing me. I was distracted enough that it was hard to get through the rest of the book. I put it down, about halfway done, as long-range sensors showed that we were coming up on a large gathering of starfighters.

“She just ended the call,” M-Bot said. “But I’m certain which ship it came from: the starfighter that belongs to her son Gremm.”

“So Peg had an extended secret call with her supposedly estranged son,” I said, “leader of a rival pirate faction. Something about all this doesn’t add up, M-Bot. What kind of game is she playing?”

“I couldn’t possibly guess,” M-Bot said. “I barely understand myself these days, let alone you organics.”

The “arena” turned out to be a large open-air region of the belt, populated by building-size floating chunks of rock. Though most of the fragments were on the same plane, here in this pocket the landscape was more uneven. It seemed like a fragment might have shattered, its pieces coming to rest at different elevations.

Well, I’d trained as a pilot in debris showers. I could handle this. However, a more distinctive feature of this region was the patches of strange glowing white light amid the chunks of rock. They were like mini lightbursts, but weren’t much larger than my ship. Actually, they reminded me of the little white hole I’d seen in the vision, the one that had eventually become a fragment.

Those holes made me uncomfortable. The others had told me about them, but still... Those were patches of pure nowhere, somehow breaking through into the belt. And I was going to have to fly among them.

# 28

A ragtag bunch of a hundred different starfighters were arrayed around the arena. Markings on the wings or fuselages identified their factions. No other theme unified them—except perhaps for a sense of ramshackle piecemealness.

Several had obviously had their cockpits expanded to make room for a larger species. Others were bulky shuttles or other industrial craft—but with an amusing number of weapons strapped to them, like the “super-gun” I’d made as a little girl by taping six toys together.

There were also many with dangerous designs: sleek military vessels with integrated weapons and large boosters. I picked out Gremm, the champion; his ominous starfighter was shaped like a wicked crescent moon, pointed ends facing my direction. It was larger than a DDF Poco, but made up for it with enormous boosters and a deadly armament. Now that I had time to study it carefully, I counted *five* destructors on the thing.

“Peg,” a voice said over the line—my ship translating. It was a low growling voice, and spoke the same language Peg did. “Took your sweet time as always.”

“I like to enjoy myself, Gremm,” Peg said back. “And the simple things give me pleasure.”

“Like being slow?”

“Like knowing I’ve made you wait,” Peg said, with a laugh. “You ready to be on with this?”

“I would be,” Gremm said. “Except I’m not champion anymore.”



“*What?*” Peg demanded.

“I lost the title!” Gremm explained. “Earlier today. The Cannonaders arrived early, and I thought we’d do some dueling while we waited. But...I lost.”

“Fool child,” Peg said. “You grow *hemels* this day.”

I followed this exchange with a frown. “Growing *hemels*,” I was pretty sure, was their way of saying someone was stupid.

There was something...theatrical about the exchange. Gremm and Peg had spent a half hour talking in secret; she plainly already knew about him losing the championship. But now she had to pretend she didn’t know. Why?

“Well, who *is* the champion?” Peg said. “We’ll fight them instead.”

“Cannonade newcomer,” Gremm said.

Peg growled softly. Curious, I opened a direct line to Maksim. “I think I know the Cannonade Faction. They’ve got a heklo leader?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Vlep. They are...malcontents.”

“We’re pirates, Maksim. We’re *all* malcontents.”

“Cannonaders are worse,” he explained. “The other factions can be trusted not to be too brutal. But if the Cannonade Faction has the champion...I don’t know. I’d refuse to fight, if I were you.”

Well, I wasn’t going to do *that*. In fact, I was happy for a chance to strike back at Vlep and his cronies for robbing me. But there was also something very suspicious about all of this.

*What game are you playing, Peg?* I wondered.

Another voice came on the broad channel, snappish and vaguely familiar. “We’ll fight your pilot, Peg,” Vlep said. “My champion is better than any of you. He calls himself Darkshadow.”

Darkshadow?

That was such an awesome callsign.

“Ha!” Peg said. “Darkshadow? *Really*, Vlep? Well, hope his skill is equal to his flair for the dramatic. Because we have someone special!”

“They’re going to lose,” Vlep said. “Just like your kid did. I don’t know what you two are playing at, but I don’t trust you, Peg. Any of you.”

“So nothing’s new, Vlep.”

“You sure that newcomer of yours doesn’t want to swap to join us?” Vlep asked. “The Cannonade Faction is the only one that doesn’t secretly bow to you and your spawn.”

“I don’t think I’ll be doing that, Vlep,” I said over the line, pitching my voice to be as ominous as possible. “All things considered.”

“Am...I supposed to know what that meant?” he asked back.

Scud. He didn’t recognize my voice. So much for my cool reveal. “I’m the human woman you tried to kidnap in the forest,” I said. “I’m actually a super great pilot, and I’m here to embarrass you for what you did to me.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” he said. “Darkshadow, let’s humiliate another faction. Duel until lockup. Losing group forfeits their ship to the winner.”

That was high stakes for this lot. Ships were rare enough in here that they weren’t wagered except in extreme circumstances. If I lost, M-Bot would upload to the drone, which we’d brought along—so that shouldn’t be a problem. But there was a more important issue at stake—and it involved the delicate game Peg was playing behind the scenes.

At Peg’s urging, I inched my ship forward out of the line of Broadsiders. I kept my eyes on the most dangerous ships, wondering which would be the champion—so I almost missed it when a relatively small ship soared forward. It was probably around a third of the size of my ship, with a core fuselage so narrow that the destructors on the wings looked enormous by comparison.

I realized I’d made a silly mistake. Bigger didn’t mean more dangerous. I should know that better than most. This ship reminded me of the Krell drones, and they’d been plenty deadly. And while a majority of intelligent species seemed to be roughly human-size, there were obvious exceptions.

I eyed the ship, suspicious. A newcomer good enough to beat Gremm, the longtime champion? Who was this? A figment perhaps? That would make sense. A figment pilot would explain the small size—the ship wouldn’t need a cockpit.

“Arena boundaries are being uploaded to your proximity display, Spin,” Peg said over the comm. M-Bot helpfully outlined the area—which was in

the shape of a tall column or tube. It stretched thousands of feet upward and downward, but was a fraction of that in diameter.

That would make for a narrow fighting area. Like...having a duel in a tunnel, or in a shaft stretching up toward the sky. “What happens if I go out of bounds?” I said on a private line, realizing I’d never asked. “Do I lose?”

“Nah,” Peg said. “What’s the fun in that? If you go out of bounds, everyone else can shoot at you—so I’d advise against it. Unless you’re growing too many *muluns*. You ready?”

I took a deep breath. “I know there’s something about this you aren’t telling me, Peg.”

She remained quiet.

“I’ll still do it,” I said, “but at least tell me one thing: do you *genuinely* need me to win this? Or is the championship about some kind of political posturing?”

“I need this, Spin,” Peg said, her voice growing softer. “I *really* need this. This is our chance at uniting the factions. There are details I haven’t told you, but that part is legitimate. I have put, one might say, all of my fruit into your cart. Please don’t drive it off a cliff.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

My screen flashed green and I hit the overburn, boosting into the arena proper.

# 29

The champion didn't fire on me immediately. He zipped in close, then veered away, clearly expecting me to tail him.

A test. He wanted to judge my skill. I decided not to bite, instead turning upward and flying along the perimeter of the arena.

"I find no matches for that starfighter design in my database," M-Bot said. "Alas, I have only a basic list of Superiority ships, and this seems an advanced model."

"It might not even be Superiority," I said. "Chet thinks that occasionally other ships end up in here via hyperjump accidents."

I swooped upward, then turned back around. I didn't miss that several other ships kept pace with me outside the arena barrier—pirates eager for the chance to take potshots if I drifted out of bounds.

All right. I had a feel for the shaftlike shape of the arena now, but I was still at a disadvantage, as I'd never flown in here before—while the champion had done it at least once. I performed a quick weave between several of the floating chunks, then eyed one of the strange glowing white patches.

The proximity sensor blared an alert that indicated the champion was heading for me. Darkshadow had realized that I was acclimating to the terrain, and so he would need to make the first move—lest he give me time to adjust. I slammed on my overburn, dodging out of the way as the champion tried to tail me.

I soon had to cut the overburn. Going too fast while dodging wasn't always the best idea, depending on reaction speed and turning capability. Instead I zoomed down along the curved perimeter—shooting through the shaft at its edge—hoping the champion would slip out of bounds. Unfortunately, Darkshadow proved competent at avoiding that. Indeed, that straightaway only earned me a few shots from behind, which were hard to evade without going out of bounds.

Best to stay to the center of the arena. I pulled up and went soaring in that direction, weaving between floating chunks. The champion stuck with me; he *was* good. And he proved to have a light-lance himself—which he used in pivots. That was strange. I had yet to meet a nonhuman from the Superiority who used a light-lance the way we did in the DDF.

Fortunately, over the next few minutes of leading him through a chase, I decided I was probably the better pilot. I just had to...

*I felt something.*

Something like fingers on my brain.

I was a lonely rock in the darkness. A mist reached around me, embracing me, smothering me.

A pair of burning white eyes appeared, reflected in the canopy of my starship. Eyes that fixated upon me.

*We see you.*

I was thrown back into the conflict as a destructor blast crackled across my shield. Scud! I twisted to the left and dropped in a weaving spin between two floating asteroids, effectively dodging further shots.

“Spensa?” M-Bot asked. “What’s wrong?”

I searched the scanner. Yeah, I’d drifted close to a white patch. “The delvers are watching. Can you get me a scanner analysis of those white patches?”

“Working,” M-Bot said.

Destructor fire chased me again. I spotted a series of asteroids floating nearby, then slammed my overburn and shot toward them.

The champion followed. I speared the second asteroid I passed with my light-lance—but didn’t merely use it to turn. I spun all the way around it,

employing the small asteroid as a counterweight. That hurled the chunk of rock backward, making it collide with the next asteroid in line—which the champion had just speared to use in a turn. The collision threw off his maneuver, making him break out of the turn and shoot away erratically.

After a quick release, I stabbed a third rock and used it to pivot around behind the champion. As he reoriented, he found me on his tail, firing. I scored a hit, his shield crackling. To Darkshadow's credit, he didn't panic, but he *did* go into evasives. And...scud. I *knew* that set of maneuvers. I searched my memory, full of people I was—alarmingly—beginning to forget.

My training was still relatively clear. And the champion was performing an exact set of maneuvers taught by the DDF. Before I could follow that thought, my mind fuzzed again.

*We've found you, noise. You should not be here. You SHOULD NOT BE HERE.* Burning eyes in my canopy, multiplying, more and more sets that—

"Spensa!" M-Bot shouted.

I veered out of the way, narrowly avoiding a collision with an asteroid. That was...that was *really* inconvenient.

"More delvers?" he asked.

"Yeah. They're not happy." Scud, the champion was on my tail again.

"Spin?" Peg said over the comm. "Remember to watch those white spots. If you get too close, you'll risk some of the distortions that happen in No Man's Land."

"Trying," I said. "Little harder than it looks."

I performed another series of light-lance moves, mostly to keep asteroids between me and the champion. Fortunately, he strayed too close to a white spot himself, and he reacted as I had—stalling, distracted. I could use that; get an advantage maybe?

The champion pulled out of his diversion and stayed on me for the next bit. So, when I spotted two of the white spots floating near one another, I decided to do something brash. I took a sudden veer right between them.

"This one's on purpose," I said to M-Bot. "Keep us from crashing if something goes wrong with me."

“Okaaaaay,” he said. “I have your analysis though. There’s matter in the center of those. But it has a strange spectroscopy to it—unlike anything in my scientific databases. I think they might be a kind of rock, like acclivity stone but charged a different way? So...be careful.”

I darted between the white patches.

*Leave this place, noise!*

*I will leave, I said, if you promise never to enter where I am from. You will stay in the nowhere, and I will stay in the somewhere.*

*No. Because the noise will not stop! Can you stop the noise, noise?*

*I can’t promise that, I said. But we aren’t a threat to you. You can live, and we can live, and ignore one another.*

*No. You can stop. Or you can be made to stop. You pain us. You give us...the pain...of another self...*

We came shooting out from between the two white spots, and the ship flew by itself, veering to the side, out of range and away from some asteroids.

“It’s working!” M-Bot said. “I’m actually helping!”

I grinned, taking back the controls. M-Bot wasn’t a great pilot, but he could react when close to the white spots, which had hopefully given us an edge. Indeed, I checked the proximity sensor and saw that Darkshadow had decided to follow me—but had been forced to slow first, to not risk slamming into something after losing control.

That meant I was able to execute a tight loop and come in shooting before the champion was able to get back up to speed and escape. Two more hits took his shield down. He dodged away, but I fell on his tail.

One more shot and I’d win this. I got in close as Darkshadow dodged into some rubble, then lined up for the shot—but in that instant Darkshadow blasted his IMP. The wave of close-range energy knocked out my own shield. He darted away on a massive overburn before I could land the shot.

“Not bad,” M-Bot said. “That champion is good.”

Yeah. Strangely so. When Darkshadow got away from me, he used what seemed like a DDF scatter escape—very similar to the series of maneuvers I’d taught the Broadsiders. I couldn’t be absolutely certain, but something

about the way he flew was familiar. Who was this? Did he really have the same training that I'd been given? Was it...

I felt a sudden cold feeling, mixed with longing. Could it be him? I'd felt him in here, when questing outward. Or was that just wishful thinking?

*Don't be stupid*, the rational part of my brain said. *Your father couldn't fit in that small cockpit. In fact, of all the races you know, it could only fit a figment or...or a...*

Oh, *scud!* "M-Bot, can you get a comm line to that champion?"

"Of course," he said. He flashed the light on the instrument panel that let me know the line was open.

"Hey, Darkshadow," I said to the other ship, which was hugging the perimeter and flying upward. "Any last words before I defeat you?"

"I am a swift minnow upon the tides of time," the response came. "They may crush ships against the shore, but I swim them easily."

Well, Saints and stars. It *was* him.

"Spensa!" M-Bot said, cutting the line to the other ship. "That voice. It's —"

"Hesho," I said.

"He's dead!"

"He vanished during the fight with Brade," I said, "when the kitsen ship was blasted open and exposed to vacuum. They assumed he got sucked out. But that was in the middle of a *lot* of weird things happening with cytonics."

Not the least of which had involved the summoning of a delver into the somewhere.

"I feel..." M-Bot said. "I feel *happy!* I never spoke to him directly, but I feel like he was my friend, Spensa."

He was mine too. "Open that comm line again," I said. "Hey, Hesho? It's *me*. It's...um, Alanik... Well, you know, the person who was pretending to be her..."

Right. That was all rather complicated.

"I know not that name," the voice said. "I am the Darkshadow. He with no past. The nameless warrior cursed to wander eternity without home or



ally, always seeking memories he can no longer retain. I am fleeting, but a whisper upon time itself.”

He said it all with utter solemnity. Man, I loved that little fox-gerbil.

“You don’t remember anything?” I asked him.

“I have only the instincts of a warrior to guide me,” he replied. “You will not distract me from my current purpose, adversary. Though you have fought admirably, I will defeat you, then compose poetry for your funeral.”

“This...um...isn’t to the death, Hesho.”

“I will defeat you,” he said in the same exact tone, “and compose poetry for your retirement party.”

He must have been isolated during his first days in the belt, and lost everything. Now that I knew who it was, I was even more impressed by his flying. Hesho had commanded a ship, and though my memory was admittedly fuzzy, I *thought* he’d mostly acted as a captain.

But he’d also been part of my extensive training sessions. I’d assumed some random crewmember had been manning—er, fox-gerbiling—the controls of their ship. It seemed, however, that the pilot had been Hesho himself.

How could I use that knowledge? He might be good at dodging and following flight patterns, but he would have let members of his bridge crew work other system controls. He’d messed up earlier on a light-lance pivot. He wouldn’t be as good at multitasking as I was.

I moved in close to some other asteroids as he tried to come back around to attack me. I kept him busy, weaving and dodging, and got farther and farther ahead of him. Finally, he broke off to pull back.

At that moment, I shut down my systems to go for a shield reignition. He, expectedly, did the same. You couldn’t run boosters and power up a shield at the same time.

The thing was, I was fainting.

As soon as he powered down, I spun my ship and slammed on my overburn, ripping across the battlefield toward him. He was too slow to respond, and he barely powered up before I reached him. Instead of shooting him, however, I hit him with my light-lance, then leaned hard on

the controls, boosting with everything I had. This flipped my ship around—yanking him like a ball on a chain and sending him spinning out through the perimeter of the arena.

There, he was shot by at least ten watching pirate ships from various factions—completely locking up his ship.

“Dramatic,” M-Bot said.

“Hesho deserves the best,” I said to him. “Even if he doesn’t remember. Hang on. Before we go celebrate, I need to buzz the delvers again.”

“Is that smart?”

“Nope,” I said, slowing and crossing the arena as if to rejoin the Broadsiders—but veering close to a white spot.

*We can work this out, I sent to the delvers. You don’t have to fight us. Don’t listen to Winzik, at the very least. He is evil.*

*Evil is a thing of noises, they sent back, confused by the impressions I’d sent them. You are all evil.*

*Please, I sent. I am trying to understand you.*

*Understand this. Leave. All of you must leave. And never return.*

The impression was filled with malevolence, disgust, and...fear? Yes, fear. They hadn’t wanted me to feel that part, but I could now pick out more and more that they wanted to hide.

The impression faded, and I left the region feeling disappointed. No accommodation. One of us would have to be destroyed.

I rejoined the Broadsiders, who were gathering together with the other hundred-odd ships of the various pirate factions. Peg was already on the comm, broadcasting widely to all of the collected pirates. “Ha!” she said. “So much for your secret weapon, Vlep!”

He didn’t respond. The members of the Cannonade Faction were already gathering to withdraw. Whatever Peg’s next move, she needed to make it now.

“Look how strong we’ve grown,” she said, inching her shuttle out of the Broadsider line to face all the others. “Look at how *skilled* we’ve become! How many months has it been since any of us have lost a ship to the Superiority?”

“Vlep lost one a few weeks back,” Gremm said, his voice a grumble. “But *my* fighters are good enough to avoid it.”

Peg inched her shuttle forward a little farther. “The Superiority forces at Surehold are weak! While we have grown stronger and stronger. Now, you see the champion I’ve brought? She’s been training my fighters. She spent her *life* fighting the Superiority!”

“Wait,” a new voice said. “Is this true?” It was another rough voice, speaking Peg’s language. I guessed that was her other son, Semm.

“It’s true,” I said. “My people have been at war with the Superiority for decades, and I know their tactics. I’ve destroyed dozens of their ships—eighty-seven actually, at last count. If you want to take Surehold, *I* can make it happen.”

“Take Surehold?” another voice asked, a high-pitched one, but not Vlep’s. “Are we really talking about this again?” M-Bot wrote on my screen that this was the leader of the fifth faction, a female heklo called Gward.

“I agree with Gward,” Peg’s first son said. “This is an old irrelevant argument. We decided against this course two years ago!”

“And how much has changed in those years?” Peg demanded. “Look, you all know that things are strange in the belt these days. You’ve heard of the creatures with the glowing eyes. You’ve seen isolated people losing their memories faster and faster.

“Worse, we’re vulnerable. All it will take is for the Superiority to decide we’re too much of a liability, and to double the military presence in here. Or triple it. They could wipe us out. But *not* if we control Surehold. *Not* if we’re bold enough to strike.”

I waited, holding my breath. It was such a good argument. Couldn’t they see? This *was* the time to strike.

“I hate it,” Semm finally said, “but she’s correct. This...is worth discussing.”

“Are you sure we want to take that risk?” Gremm said.

“Yeah,” said the sixth faction leader—though I only knew this because of M-Bot’s notes on my screen. “I...I don’t want to aggravate them. If we lose, it could be catastrophic!”

“Doing nothing is worse, Ido,” Peg said. “It is time. Surehold has an icon, and reality ashes. We can use those to keep our memories. We can control this entire region, and we can be safe.”

“I...can’t believe I’m saying this,” Gremm said. “But I think she might be right. It *is* time.”

“If you strike at Surehold, Mother,” Semm said, “the Red Sails will join you.”

“So will the Jolly Rogers,” Gremm said.

“I guess...” Gward said. “Well, I guess we will too. Sure could use some reality ashes over here. We’ll split the spoils equally, right?”

“Equally,” Peg said. “I promise it.”

“Well, we’re not interested in this insanity,” Vlep of the Cannonade Faction said. Nearby, one of his repair tugs had finished getting Hesho’s vessel online, and it began moving under its own power again.

“Hey,” Peg said. “We won that ship! Leave it!”

“Gremm can keep his ship,” Vlep said. “We won that earlier—but if we keep ours, he can keep his. Deal? None of you can fly this thing anyway.”

“Deal, I suppose,” Gremm said, with a sigh. “Mother?”

“Fine, Vlep,” Peg said. “But why not join us? We—”

But before she should finish her speech, the entire Cannonade Faction overburned away. Scud. I had M-Bot open a line to Hesho, but he didn’t accept it.

“Should we go after them?” Semm asked.

“Rotting scum,” Gremm said.

“Let them go,” Peg said. “We don’t need them. What about you, Ido? You with us?”

“Let me ask the others,” the final faction leader said. He left the group comm and returned in a few minutes. “We’ll do it. But, um, you’re *sure* we can win? Like *really* sure?”

“You saw my champion fight,” Peg said. “Trust me. We’ve got this for *certain*.”

They made plans then, setting up a time for the assault. I sat back, listening to the details with half an ear. The extent of Peg’s plan was

becoming clear to me. And honestly, I was impressed.

I didn't get a chance to confirm my suspicions until a half hour later, when we were flying with the Broadsiders back toward our base. Peg opened a direct line to me.

"So," she said. "You had some questions?"

"I think I've figured it out," I said. "You and your sons never actually had a falling-out, did you? You three realized that the pirates were too timid, too untested, to go up against the Superiority. You faked a schism.

"*That* let you control how your coalition fractured. You continued to pretend to be antagonistic to one another, so that when the time was right, Gremm and Semm could agree with you—and it would seem like they were authentically persuaded. Who else could continue to doubt the attack was a good idea if those two—who hated you—were willing to go along with it?"

"Smart," Peg said. "Words. I hope it's not so obvious to everyone else."

"What happened with the champion?" I asked. "Why swap out to someone else at the last minute?"

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Peg explained. "Gremm called me in a panic earlier today. He'd agreed to a quick duel to warm up—he assumed Vlep could never recruit someone good enough to beat him."

"Ah..." I said. "Then he lost."

"Fool boy. Almost ruined two years of work. We *needed* a victory like this to galvanize everyone. They're far more skilled than they think. Two years of sparring will do that."

"You set all of this up on purpose!" I said. "The factions, the raids, the honorable-ish way of fighting—it was all to *train* the pirates without them *realizing* they were being trained! You wanted a low-stakes way to prepare them for the assault on Surehold."

"I set them to recruiting too," she explained. "Among the people tossed in here. Grew our numbers pretty well. That, and I led some tactical raids against the Superiority to test their defenses and steal ships. Every time my faction or one of the boys' factions got too many ships, we lost a few to the others to keep them strong and training."

Genius. Scud, I wished we had Peg in the DDF.

“Still hoped I’d be able to get Vlep’s group,” Peg continued. “He’s been a weed in my garden for far too long. We should be able to do our assault with five factions. I hope. Either way, you did your part.”

“My part won’t be done until we stomp the Superiority,” I said. “And I get to visit the portal in Surehold. You set the assault for three days away. Why wait so long? We should move now.”

“No need to grow *umalitas*, kid!” Peg said. “The other factions need time to prepare—and *we* just won a major victory! Tonight we *party*.”

# 30

“**A**nd then,” I said, creeping through the circle of chairs, “the evil member of Lion Clan grinned a terrible grin. ‘No, Simba,’ he said. ‘It was not mere chance that your father fell to his fate, but it was *I* who cast him to it! I killed him so that I might have his throne, just as I will now kill *you!*’”

The crowd of Broadsiders gasped. To enhance the experience, I did Gran-Gran’s pantomimes—clawing at the air like a lion. I prowled back and forth before the audience. Maksim had turned on his starfighter’s floodlights, but narrowed and lowered the beams so they illuminated only me. We’d closed the blinds to create a dark atmosphere.

“Well,” I said, “Simba was so horrified by this revelation that he let his uncle advance, forcing him back, back, back to the very edge of the tower of the fortress! He had forgotten his training from the knights Timbaa and Pumon! In a moment he remembered their long sparring sessions, where he had been forced off the log and made to eat bugs as punishment.

“‘Remember,’ Pumon’s wise voice said in his mind, ‘never put your rear toward an enemy. And never let them control your footing in a duel.’ Wise Pumon, the stout knight, now bravely fought the endless Hyena Clan hordes upon the wall below!

“Simba stood his ground, perched atop the tip of the tower known as the Rock of Pride Fortress. ‘You fool, Uncle,’ Simba growled. ‘For though you presumed to cast me to my death like you did my father, in reality you have ceded to me the high ground, granting me the upper hand in our duel.’

“Scar shouted and lashed out, but Simba’s training as an outcast among the Knights of the Lost Savannah served him well. His ghostly father appeared behind him, glowing like a halo of light. Mighty was the clash! Perched as they were, the entirety of the kingdom could see them atop the fortification! But Scar was an assassin, no trained knight, and his subtle ways could not uphold him in the full light of day and truth!

“Channeling the No Fear of Reprisal technique taught to him by the lanky Timbaa, the bold prince grabbed his uncle by the neck and threw him to the side. The elder of Lion Clan, unable to maintain his footing, slipped and fell over the edge of the Rock, barely holding on by the tips of his fingers.”

I paused for effect, like Gran-Gran always had. Giving them time to imagine the bold warrior prince atop the tower, at last victorious after his long exile. My audience leaned forward, eager for the next words.

“Simba stood tall,” I said. “The fighting of the armies below ceased as eyes turned toward the two monarchs. ‘Now,’ Simba proclaimed, ‘you will announce your betrayal of my father to all, that they may know your treachery.’

“‘I admit it, nephew!’ Scar shouted. ‘I betrayed your father—the *Hyenas* forced me to do so! I was but a pawn! Please let me live!’

“Now, down below, the frenzied queen of the Hyena Clan warriors paused in her duel with Nala, mistress-at-arms. Among barbarian culture, you must *never* beg for your life. Upon seeing the cowardly act from Scar, Hyena Clan turned their weapons away as one from the Lions—refusing the fight.

“Simba looked down upon his uncle, the author of so much pain and suffering. ‘I cannot forgive you, Uncle,’ he declared, ‘for the gods themselves demand justice. And so, as rightful king, I now declare your sentence to be death.’

“And then, with a mighty roar, Simba cast his uncle to his doom. Now his father’s wandering soul could finally rest. Revenge had been exacted, and balance had returned to the land. The circle was at long last complete.”



There was some romance stuff after that, which I didn't mind so much now as I had when younger, but this had always felt like a better ending to me. It was a story about barbarians and knights, after all.

It was strange to me how well I remembered the story—all of the stories, actually. Other things about my past were fading, but the stories remained perfectly cemented in my mind. Like an anchor in my past, tied to my soul.

The conclusion brought cheers from the other pilots, and Nuluba—ever quietly going about making life easier for everyone else—opened the blinds to better light the hangar. We'd all gathered to feast our victory, and I had offered a story. I hadn't realized how well it would be received.

*They're eager for reminders of the world outside,* I thought, watching the pirates chat. *Even if they come from a different culture.*

Others wandered toward the tables, where we'd set out various foods that had been found on salvage runs or raids. We didn't need food anymore, but Maksim said there was something about the *act* of tasting that helped restore memories.

I spotted the other human chatting with RayZed, a young female tanuzedran from one of the other flights, whose species looked kind of like red pandas. She was nibbling at the food on a little plate. I felt like I should recognize the varieties, but...that part of my memory had well and truly faded. There was a red bit of food, and...and some little yellow bits of something?

Chet wandered over to me, his arm still in its sling. "Spensa," he said, "that story was fantastic! I feel as if I once knew it. At least, parts are familiar to me."

"Gran-Gran loved it because it spoke of a warrior in exile," I said. "She taught me that although my people had been exiled, we could remain strong."

"Your performance at the duel today was inspiring," he said. "You are truly as skilled as your earlier boasts implied. And these, they are a good family to you." He nodded toward the gathered pirates, but I sensed a certain melancholy to his tone.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Merely an old man’s foolishness,” he said to me. “I fear I am not of much use to pilots. What need have these for an explorer who cannot fly?”

“I have need of you,” I said. “You led me to those ruins—and you knew that the next stop was in Surehold. And besides, there’s your hunt...”

Chet had been quietly going among the pirates, asking carefully about icons and reality ashes. I’d finally asked Peg about my icon, and she had been surprised—claiming that none of her people had seen it. I didn’t know that she would lie to me, but Chet and I had decided it would be good for him to investigate a little on his own.

“You’ve been *great* at this part,” I whispered to him. “Far better than I’d be. People genuinely like you, Chet. They talk to you.”

“If that were true,” he said, “and if I were as good at this quest as you indicate, I’d have located the...missing item by now.” He shook his head, then glanced at me and raised his good hand. “No need to bolster my ego further. It is taking on a little water, but not sinking. I merely...I fear we stay here too long. I fear being in one place.”

“We’ll move soon enough,” I said.

“And the delvers?” he asked. “Did you...feel them earlier today, in the duel?”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“If they have located us, and decide to move against us...”

“We’ll be gone in a few days,” I repeated. “Don’t worry. Relax, let your arm heal. We’ll be at Surehold before you know it.”

“Yes,” he said, then nodded. “Yes, of course. Thank you, Spensa. I believe I needed to hear that.” He smiled toward Maksim as the bearded young man wandered over carrying a plate of food.

“That was a great story, Spin,” Maksim said. “I like the parts about honor. When I was young, I believed that all humankind was these rampaging monsters. I always wondered when that would manifest in me. When *I’d* start killing.” He looked down. “I read some of the records when I was older. We...did attack a lot of people. So it’s good to hear we had

stories of honor as well. Even if they're fanciful. I mean, lions couldn't actually talk, could they?"

"I've always interpreted it," I said, "as different clans of samurai who took the names of fearsome beasts in order to intimidate their enemies."

"Lions and hyenas?" Maksim said. "I don't think they had those in Japan, Spin."

I'll admit, my Old Earth geography was spotty. Hadn't Gran-Gran said the story was from Denmark? Anyway, Chet was inspecting the bits of food as Maksim offered us the plate. I hesitated; the longer I spent in here, the stranger an activity eating seemed. Had I really done that every day of my life? Stuffing things in my mouth?

I picked up one of the yellow bits, holding it pinched between my fingers. "What is it?"

"Can said 'corn,' " Maksim explained. "In English."

"I do not know the word," Chet said, selecting a piece. "It is an alien color for a plant. I believe those on Earth were normally green, were they not?"

"This one isn't," Maksim said. "I've been saving it, and a can of this red stuff. The label said 'beets.' Either of you remember anything about them?"

"Nope," I said, turning the little corn chunk in my fingers. "'Beats' is a cool name though. Isn't it strange that we used to *consume* piles of this stuff every *day*?"

"Yeah," Maksim said. "The names and...and the...mouth smell? The way your mouth distinguishes foods? That stuff? All gone. Can't remember for the life of me. I swear I used to like some of this stuff and hate some of it."

"I am fortunate to have lost that part of my memory entirely," Chet said. "I don't recall *ever* eating. And I'm happy for it. Mashing such things up inside your mouth? It would stick to your teeth and tongue! Then you *swallow*? Force it down your throat in wet clumps held together by saliva? No, I shall pass, my friends." He set the corn on the plate.

I understood the sentiment; thinking about it made my skin crawl. And yet, I did recall some...latent happiness associated with eating. I put the

little bit of corn in my mouth, then winced. It was somehow both slimy and firm at the same time. I mashed it between my teeth a few times, and it popped, releasing the most awful texture. Like it had been filled with mud. I barely prevented myself from gagging.

“Surreal, isn’t it?” Maksim ate one of the bits, his eye twitching as he forced himself to swallow it. Swallowing food...how had I never noticed how bizarre that was? M-Bot was right. Why did we put food where *air* went?

I spat my corn bits into a napkin Maksim handed me. “That’s disgusting,” I said, then wiped off my tongue. “That *definitely* didn’t inspire me to remember anything.”

Still, I forced myself to try the other stuff. It at least appeared to be bleeding, which might have been where the cool name came from. It was even *more* slimy, but this time I was prepared. I was a warrior descended from warriors. I could eat a beat. It was nauseating. It...

Wait.

What was that? I...had tried this once, in the mess hall at the DDF, where they had odd heritage foods from the gardens. I remembered Nedd’s face as he laughed—I’d made the very same joke about the name. I remembered Jorgen smiling, FM explaining how much she liked the food, Kimmalyne watching and nodding, Arturo lecturing us on how it was grown...

A perfect picture in time, all of their faces suddenly clear to me. Scud, I missed them. I needed to get home, to be with them again.

More, I needed to protect them. From the delvers.

*I’m trying, I thought. And I’m coming. I promise.*

“That was disgusting and wonderful together at once,” I said to Maksim and Chet. “It’s so strange that it *is* so strange. I only left the somewhere...” How long ago had it been? I forcibly brought out the numbers M-Bot gave me each morning. “...just under a month ago.”

“This place changes you fast,” Maksim said. “And then makes you feel like you’re in limbo...” After trying the beat, he walked back to the table to get some other samples.

Chet wandered over to Shiver, who was talking about how odd she found our means of ingesting. So inefficient, in her words. Better to just grow over patches of minerals and use them as you need them. I rested back against the wall and found myself smiling again.

I belonged here. Granted, I'd belonged other places too. I could faintly remember similar evenings with my friends at the DDF headquarters. But I also remembered pain. Fear. Loss. Hurl's death. Worry for Jorgen.

Here, I didn't have those same fears. And scud, I had to admit these last few weeks had been invigorating—exciting. First the exploration, then infiltrating pirates? Now earning their trust, defeating their champion?

This had been thrilling. Like a story, like the things I'd always imagined myself doing. As before, while exploring with Chet, I felt a faint sense of guilt to be enjoying myself while my friends back home were in danger. But then again, the *real* danger was the delvers, and I was working on that as best I could. And didn't I deserve to rest between fights?

Every warrior needed a break, didn't they? A Valhalla? An Elysium? The stories understood. In the greatest of warrior societies, there was a reward for those who spent their days killing.

The group began calling for me to tell another story, so I walked back toward the light. I'd offer them three different options, like Gran-Gran had done for me when I was a child.

I *did* love my friends, and I *was* doing everything I could to help them. So I determined not to feel guilty for finding a place where I could live the life I'd always wanted. I had been exiled. But in that, like Satan from the stories, I had found a place I could make into heaven itself.

Right then, the base's scanner's alarm started going crazy.

# 31

“Imminent collision of this fragment with...” Nuluba trailed off, glancing up from the scanner data toward all of us, gathered around the machine.

“With what?” Peg demanded.

“With another fragment,” Nuluba said. “I’ve never seen anything like it. The fragment is coming in so quickly... Scanner says impact is in only half an hour.”

I shared a look with Chet, whose expression was grim. Last time, the incoming fragment had completely annihilated the one we were on.

“Get people to ships and ready to evacuate,” Peg announced.

“Captain!” Nuluba said. “We have five ships down for maintenance to prepare for the assault! We can get them up and flying, but in a half hour? Plus, if we abandon the base, we’ll lose equipment, spare parts, diagnostics...”

Scud. As we’d been getting ready for the party earlier, the ground crews had started their jobs—assuming they’d have three days to fine-tune the starfighters for our upcoming assault.

“Evacuate anyway,” Peg said, “just in case.”

“Also, Nuluba,” I said, “send the scanner data to my ship.”

“What? Why—”

“Do it!” I said, running for M-Bot, Chet on my heels. I hauled myself up on the wing, then helped Chet with a hand up. M-Bot popped open the cockpit, and we leaped in as he lit up the ship’s dash.

“I’m getting data direct from the scanner,” he said. “Oh my. That’s bad.”

“Math it!” I said. “Can we do anything?”

“Calculating... That one coming in is a lot smaller... The Broadsiders have access to six light-lances for maneuvering ships...” A bunch of figures popped up on my screen. “Done,” he said. “There’s time. Barely.”

“We lift the *entire fragment* that’s coming toward us?” Chet said, reading the instructions. “Bold!”

“And possible,” M-Bot said. “Only if you move quickly, Spensa. I mean, I know you really enjoyed the last collision, but...”

I stood up and shouted toward Peg as she rushed by. “I’ve got another option, Peg!”

Peg pulled to a stop, looking toward me.

“Me and five other ships pulling with light-lances,” I said, “can move that incoming fragment upward just enough to avoid us. But we have to be quick about it!”

She didn’t miss a beat. She shouted for everyone else to keep evacuating, but organized a small crew to execute M-Bot’s plan.

I settled in the cockpit and glanced back at Chet. “You’d never encountered this before that first time?”

“Nope,” he said, putting on a helmet.

“And now it’s happened to us twice?”

“Yup.”

“You know what I told you earlier, about not being worried that the delvers might know where we are?”

“Indeed.”

“Pretend I said something intelligent instead.”

“I shall endeavor to do my best.”

In moments, Peg had a crew for me to lead—including herself, with her powerful shuttle. Fortunately, these ships already had light-lances attached for towing ships that had been locked down by destructor fire.

“Go to these coordinates on the incoming fragment,” I said, and relayed M-Bot’s instructions and figures to their displays. “Attach your light-lances to the acclivity stone there, then be ready to lift.”

Peg prodded everyone along again. They began taking off, but not with nearly the urgency I'd have wanted.

"You'd think they'd be more frightened," M-Bot said.

"It's too easy to get comfortable in here," Chet replied. "Particularly if you stay in one place for long."

I followed the instructions from M-Bot, blasting off toward the incoming fragment. I was a faster ship, so I took up position at the rear of the fragment where he directed me. This one, like the one before, was barren—just a solid block of stone. Small, dense, and most importantly fast—like a bullet.

I matched speeds with the fragment and launched my light-lance out to connect to the stone. The other ships started following suit one by one as they arrived.

"Under fifteen minutes until contact," Chet noted, watching the clock M-Bot had put up on the display for us, and reading the projections. "We're cutting this very close."

"Everyone is in place," I said as the final ship connected its light-lance.

"You need to all pull directly up," M-Bot explained. "Together, with an equal force. Here, I'm sending instructions to the others as if from you."

I nodded and turned the ship upward, pointing the boosters down. My acclivity ring rotated automatically, so it was pointed downward as well.

"Careful," M-Bot told me as I moved into position. "Give yourself as much slack as possible at first, and don't hit the booster too hard. You'll risk pushing down on the fragment with your thrust, negating some of the value of your pull."

I gripped the thrust, refusing to give in to my instincts, which urged me to throw on the overburn. Instead, I slowly ramped up the booster to the thresholds M-Bot indicated. It felt like I wasn't making any progress at all, as if nothing were changing.

All through it, M-Bot's voice continued calmly. "Ease off a little. That's it..."

He sent similar instructions to the other pilots' displays. I glanced at the monitor, watching as we got closer, and closer, and closer to the Broadsider



base. Until...we *barely* crested over the top, with enough clearance to avoid hitting the base structures. We knocked off the tops of a few trees though.

I let out a long breath while M-Bot sent another order to everyone that we could simultaneously power down and then cut our light-lances. I complied, then slowed in the air—letting that “bullet” fragment zip away. Without our influence, it lowered back down.

Then, a few minutes later, it collided with the next fragment it encountered. Both fragments were made up of more rock than the one that had collapsed before—and so they crushed together, stone crumpling and bulging like the fronts of some of the starfighters I’d seen impact. The sound was incredible.

As I hovered in place, Peg slowly drifted up beside me in her shuttle. “Never seen anything like that,” she said privately over the comm. “I’m growing *gludens*. Though now that we’re safe, I’m kind of glad I get to watch it. This feels like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

I was sure that for most people, it would be just that.

“Peg,” I said, “we need to make our assault on Surehold sooner than planned.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Sitting here like this is tempting fate. The nowhere is changing in dangerous ways. Plus, I’m...getting too complacent. I want to be moving on.”

“All right, all right. Don’t toss *tidos* at me. Maybe we can move the timeline up.”

The fragments that had collided shattered into multiple pieces of acclivity stone. The largest portions stayed pushed together, fused in the center, while smaller bits went bouncing free, spraying out like enormous chunks of shrapnel.

“You know,” Peg said absently, “it’s almost like the nowhere just up and decided to try to kill us.” She laughed, though there was an edge to the sound.

“Let’s assault Surehold tomorrow,” I said. “Waiting will only give the Superiority a chance to notice that we’re gathering, preparing something.

We're ready. Let's do it."

Peg was silent for a time, and I couldn't judge her body language, not in separate ships as we were. I tried to inch mine forward to glance in through the window of her tug.

"Peg?" I asked.

"All right. We'll need to rush to get all the ships back together and do last-minute preparations. If we can manage that...then, yeah. Tomorrow. I'll let the other faction leaders know."

# 32

I got up the next morning eager, excited. I'd done a quick check-in with Jorgen to let him know what I'd overheard in regard to the delvers and Winzik. But I hadn't stayed with him long; I'd known many of our team would be working all night on the ships. The pilots had been ordered to get a good night's sleep, and so I had forced myself to do just that.

Indeed, the hangar was already a buzz of activity when I entered. Ground crew members were still dashing this way and that. By the large clock Peg had set up, we had two hours until departure—and there still appeared to be a lot to get done. Back home, I'd have left all these sorts of preparations to the professionals. That wasn't how the Broadsiders worked though.

Instead I hurried to M-Bot's ship, where Nuluba was working. She'd serviced the boosters and was just now putting the casing back on one of them. I sprang to help her lift the casing into place, and it occurred to me that this was a chance to do something I'd been meaning to for a while.

"Nuluba," I said. "I...want to apologize to you."

"Apologize, Spin?" she said, gesturing with one arm in a wide loop—something I thought was to express comfort. "You have made up for your theft of the ship."

"It's not about that," I said. "It's about how I might have treated you, particularly when I was first here. I...worry I was kind of abrasive to you."

"Ah," Nuluba said, using a drill to lock the bolts as I held the casing in place. "Yes, I did notice that. I assumed it was your natural human

aggression.”

“It was more than that,” I said. “You heard about my past?”

“A freedom fighter,” she said. “From a human enclave.”

“Yes,” I said. “Most of our jailors were varvax, though we called them the Krell. And...well, I’ve never *really* gotten over that. Despite the fact that you’ve always been nice to me, I think I might have taken it out on you.”

“My, my,” she said, and I winced, thinking—even now—of Winzik. “That is very mature of you, Spin. Very mature and very wise. I cannot say I was so quick to reject my biases when I first met Maksim.”

“Really? You did it too?”

“Oh yes,” she said as we stepped away from the now-completed booster. “It is unfortunate, and I am embarrassed. I commend you for giving me a chance, Spin. If *I* had been imprisoned by humans for many years, I do not know that I would be so willing to accept one of them into my company.”

I smiled, and she waved her hands in response. How could I have ever hated this thoughtful creature? She was so calm, so relaxed. In a way, Nuluba represented something I’d never actually known: a person at peace with themselves and their place in the universe. Or, well, the non-universe.

“You are ready to go,” she said, patting the booster. “Fully tuned. It was a pleasure.”

I looked at the ship, with its sleek shape and powerful boosters, and my excitement stoked further. “You’re always so serene with this work,” I said to Nuluba. “Whether it’s doing maintenance or taking inventory. Wouldn’t you like to fly one of these?”

“Please, no,” Nuluba said, gesturing with her fingers making a light rolling motion. A varvax laugh. “I like things simple.”

“Piloting can be simple.”

“No, pilots are too important,” she explained. “I like being ignored. That’s why I picked the job I did in the somewhere. I prefer to just sit in the corner and putter. It was...distressing that I caused so much of a fuss with

my discoveries.” She hesitated, then grew more solemn. “Not that I’d go back. I hate the lies we’ve told.”

There was a heroism in those words, a type I’d never acknowledged. To me, being a hero had always been about fighting. But Nuluba reminded me of Cuna, the quiet diplomat who had done so much to resist Winzik.

“Before you suit up,” Nuluba said, pointing, “I believe Shiver wanted to speak to you.”

We still had a good amount of time until takeoff, so I dodged around Maksim as he jogged past with a spare power matrix, then entered the resonants’ corner of the room. Here, I always felt as if I were stepping up to a large geode. They’d leaked lines of crystal—like veins in stone—out from their ships, then over to this section. When I’d asked Shiver why, she’d explained that the crystals grew naturally, and so they needed to send them somewhere.

Each time they flew away, they broke connections to this place—but so long as they returned soon enough, they could reconnect. If they moved to Surehold, what would happen? Would this crystal network in the corner eventually crumble to dust?

Up close, I could distinguish their crystals from each other. Shiver was slightly more violet, and Dllllizzzz slightly more pink. They had grown over one another in a way I was led to understand was common among friendly resonants. The two beings chatted softly in their musical language; they did that almost constantly when near each other.

“You wanted to talk to me?” I asked Shiver, settling down beside one of her larger crystals.

“Yes, Spin,” Shiver responded. “I wished to thank you. For making this possible.”

“The assault today?”

“Indeed,” Shiver said. “Peg has been planning this for years. I...vibrate with joy, knowing the plan is finally moving forward. But I also wish to thank you on behalf of Dllllizzzz. If we are successful, we will again have access to the icon at Surehold—and the reality ashes. I maintain hope that having more of those, over the long term, will continue to help her.”

“How’s she been lately?” I asked, glancing toward the array of crystals.

“It is difficult to cleave that question, Spin,” Shiver said. “Sometimes she seems almost ready to speak. At the very edge of layered words, sentences. And then...she withdraws to unlayered words. Hints at meanings. I’ve heard true words from her only a handful of times now, including when she spoke to you.”

“I don’t think I understand. Layered words, and unlayered words?”

“I apologize,” Shiver said. “Let me reverberate. We can make different crystals vibrate with different tones, and language is always two or more of those together. Dllllizzzz makes single tones. More ideas than true words.

“It *is* communication, and I can investigate her feelings, comfort her, encourage her. But her responses are rarely true words, more the tones we make while learning. This is our equivalent of what you would call ‘baby talk.’ Yet Dllllizzzz is old. Older than I am. And she flies a ship just fine.”

I nodded, studying the overlapping lattices of blue crystals, with pink or violet undertones. I’d seen Shiver help with repairs—a few days back, she’d overgrown part of Peg’s shuttle looking for a short. It was incredible the level of detail Shiver could sense with her crystals—though actually doing repairs took her much more time than it took someone motile. She could technically grow as many “arms” as she needed, but moving things usually involved encasing them in crystal and then growing that crystal to reposition the object.

I found it amazing that the resonants had developed space-age industry under those limitations. But I guessed when members of your species commonly lived thousands of years, you had other advantages. And there was something hardcore about an entire civilization made up of singing crystals. Even the wildest of Gran-Gran’s stories couldn’t compete with the universe’s biodiversity.

Admittedly though, I was still miffed about the whole sand worm thing.

“Could reality ashes actually help her?” I asked.

“I hope so,” Shiver said. “But it has been—some time? Much time?—since we found her.”

“The icon,” I said. “At Surehold. What does it look like?”

“A small child’s toy. It is kept on display, to help the workers feel comfort. It’s...beautiful.” She paused. “It appeared with Peg when she was thrown in here. But she was prevented from taking it when she rebelled. I think part of her eagerness to capture the base has to do with reclaiming it. Spin...I know that you and Chet have been looking for something among the Broadsiders. Something that was taken. An...icon?”

I didn’t respond immediately. She knew?

“You were captured with an unusual amount of reality ashes,” Shiver said. “And though Chet has been subtle, I am better than most at subtle interaction. You lost an icon. You think it stolen?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I buried it outside before sneaking in here the first time. Now it has vanished.”

“Then I have, perhaps, news for you. I helped Peg recover her icon several times at Surehold. Icons are bits of the somewhere, and respond in odd ways to being in here. Spin, they sometimes seem to get disjointed from this place—as if out of phase with the movement of fragments.”

“Which means...”

“They move on their own, on occasion. As I said, it feels as if they’ve gotten out of sync with the regular fragment motions. You find them outside safes, or in rooms where you didn’t leave them. It is rare, but I’ve seen it happen. It’s possible nobody took your icon—and I think that if one were here, Peg would have sniffed it out and told everyone. She’d insist we share the ashes. It is her way.”

That was curious news. I mulled on it a moment, and found I was glad. Perhaps I didn’t have to worry about a thief here—other than myself, naturally. But what if the icon had fallen into the void? Or vanished and appeared on another fragment entirely?

In that case, I’d never find it. I’d have to rely on our remaining ashes to get us out of here. That was possible—they should last long enough—but still, I felt a sense of loss. It hadn’t really been my father’s pin—but it had been important to me nonetheless.

As I pondered that, Shiver’s mention of Peg brought another question to mind. “Does Peg really have...a tree?”

“Yes. So do her sons, whose trees were grown from fruit on hers. The tenasi symbiosis is a beautiful thing, and I often resonate with it. You should be able to see the tree soon, as it still grows at Surehold. Those there would *never* destroy a tenasi tree, no matter how bad the blood between us and them. Once we arrive, you can see the icon for yourself as well.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I said. “But...icons, Shiver. What *are* they?”

“I have no idea,” Shiver said. “This place is strange in a lot of ways, isn’t it? But I’ll tell you this, looking at that icon I always felt as if it had a soul. Like it was a fragment of our world in the same way the delvers are a fragment of this one.”

What an odd way to describe it. I stood up, intending to extricate myself from the conversation with Shiver, who would continue to chat endlessly if you let her. I always felt so awkward excusing myself—but...well, she seemed to think all motile species were a little rude anyway. When you literally couldn’t walk away from your neighbors, you learned to be polite.

“Before you go,” Shiver said, “I...admit I have a request for you, Spin. Please do not think me forward, but I suspect you intend to leave this place. Not this region, but the nowhere entirely.”

“I do,” I said. “People need me in the somewhere.”

“I’ve never known anyone to leave without Superiority permission,” Shiver said. “And even those cases are rare. But my request is in regard to Dllllizzzz. Peg worries that once someone is *that* far gone, only getting out can help them. So if you do escape...will you see if you can find a way to open a path for Dllllizzzz and me? For her sake?”

“That helps?” I asked. “I mean...our memories...return if we leave?”

“I believe so,” Shiver said. “At least, the few people at the base who left and came back in seemed to have recovered some, if not all, of what they lost during their time here.”

“I’ll try,” I promised. “Chet is going with me, and we’ll be able to see firsthand if someone without any memories gets them back once outside.”

“Thank you. That is all I can ask. Getting out through Surehold would require negotiations with the Superiority, and I do not trust them. I do not



believe it would be safe to leave that way, no matter what they promise. I don't think the other pirates care; they prefer it in here, away from the concerns and problems of the somewhere. I am not the same. And Dllllizzzz... She needs help. She wants out. I can feel from her vibrations it is so."

"I'll do what I can," I said, then glanced to the side as Peg announced that there was less than an hour left. Time to suit up.

"Fight well, Spin," Shiver said. "And I shall do the same. Thank you again for your time with us."

I went running to clean up and get on my flight suit. I spent the next twenty minutes doing preflight checks and getting a final okay from Nuluba and Maksim to go into combat. As I finished, I spotted Chet standing down below, helmet under his arm. He'd taken off his sling last night, and his arm seemed mostly healed.

"With your permission," he said, "I should like to fly with you today, Spensa."

"It might get a little crazy," I said.

"I understand crazy better than you may assume," he replied. "And... well, I had RayZed take me out last night to run me through g-force training. I feel like I remember things better from long ago, ways to help my body withstand. Even if not, however, I prefer to join you. To be frank, I'm worried about the delvers. They failed in their attack yesterday. They will try something else."

I nodded. "Let's go, then."

# 33

**I**t was a different sort of group that left the Broadsider base that day. For the duel we'd brought everyone, flying in a leisurely way—a convoy that had been part show of force, part proof of solidarity.

Today we took only the pilots. Peg joined my flight. Loaded with firepower, but slower than the fighters, her shuttle would be a target—but could deal damage almost like a much larger gunship. By her order, we kept off the comms. There was no joking, storytelling, or sitting and idly reading books during this flight.

I spent the initial part of the flight—before we met up with the other factions—trying to contain my excitement. Our destructors were still set to nonlethal, but each of our ships had been equipped with the ability to flip them to lethal mode in case this battle turned truly dangerous.

Peg didn't want to do that. She wanted to recruit the pilots at Surehold, not kill them. But she was too pragmatic not to have the option available.

I gave Chet the controls and let him acclimatize himself to them. If I were somehow hurt during the fight, he might have to take over, as M-Bot remained unskilled. Chet performed a few simple maneuvers, showing that he did have some muscle memory for piloting, and I sat in thought, troubled by something Shiver had said. About icons.

I considered that, then closed my eyes, questing out from the cockpit with my senses. I forced myself to be extra quiet and subtle as I searched. I paused as I felt the delvers, or their attention, nearby. Waiting. And frightened.

They didn't notice me. I could feel their minds pushing out from the lightburst in this direction, but they weren't aware of me. I *could* remain invisible to them with effort, though I suspected this would only work so long as they didn't know exactly where I was.

Feeling pleased with my improvements so far, I turned away from them and sensed outward. Looking for...familiarity. I remembered that when I'd first entered the nowhere, in that jungle, I had felt a mind close to mine. Before I'd found Chet, I had sensed something. Something I'd thought was my father.

Had that been my icon? It felt foolish to think it had actually been him. Yet as I searched, I...layered my mind with a warmth. The "star-ness" I'd learned on the Path. That was like a code, or a callsign. I'd used it to batter back Brade's cloud upon me and escape from her prison. But it could also indicate who I was, where I was, though only to those I knew. Like a communication signal on a private comm band.

I felt something jump and contact me back. A mind. I brushed against it, and my heart leapt. My pin! Yes, I could feel it, and it responded. It... It...

It was angry at me for burying it.

That shocked me. The pin's mind felt familiar, loving. It felt... It felt like family.

*F-Father?* I thought.

I was returned a warm sensation. I knew it was ridiculous, but...I mean... This place *was* strange.

*Where are you?* I asked.

I was given back a sense of...Surehold? Yes, that was where the icon was. How had it gotten there? I mean, Shiver had warned me they moved. But that far?

The mind retreated.

*I'm coming to you,* I sent to the pin, then came out of my cytonic trance, confused. It couldn't *truly* be my father's soul, could it? And why—how—was the pin at Surehold? The place where I was already going? That seemed extraordinarily coincidental. And that reminded me of Chet's coincidental arrival, which I hadn't thought about in a while.

Eventually, our flight met with the other pirate factions one by one. Peg welcomed each in turn, and I sensed relief in her voice. She'd been worried they wouldn't show. She had us linger after the fourth faction joined, giving one final chance for the Cannonaders to appear. They didn't.

"All right, people," Peg said over the comm to us all. "We will *absolutely* win this. We've spent years in combat preparing, while they've been hiding, hoping the Superiority would send them more strength.

"They haven't. The Superiority doesn't care about them, or about any of us. They only care about their acclivity stone—so we're going to hit them hard and take it away. Maybe they have other mining stations far across the empty boundaries, but I know they rely on this one more than any other. So we'll lock the portal up tight, and they'll have to play by *our* terms."

The gathered eighty or so ships gave cheers and raucous calls in a variety of different types of vocalization. Chet and I joined in, hooting and shouting.

"My Jolly Rogers are ready to move to lethal destructors," Gremm announced after the noise died down.

"Not unless the enemy does first," Peg said. "Remember, these ones we're fighting—they're not really our enemy. They're merely a bunch of frightened sods trapped between two forces. We're going to come in not as raiders, but as liberators. So keep your rounds nonlethal. Call me or one of the tugs if you see a locked-up ship—even an enemy—about to collide with terrain. Stay focused on the fight, and if you face a pilot who's too good, call for help."

She got a round of agreement, and I was impressed. She and her sons had done an excellent job laying the groundwork for this battle.

"Okay!" M-Bot said in our cockpit. "I feel trembly, but somehow still eager to go forward."

"Fear and eagerness?" Chet said. "That sounds like enthusiasm."

"No, I think there would be more happy-eagerness," M-Bot said. "This is nauseous-eagerness."

"Perhaps exhilaration?" Chet said.

“I could go with that,” M-Bot replied. “Exhilaration. Yup, I’m exhilarated!”

“What are you two on about?” I asked.

“The AI and I have been bonding,” Chet said with a proud tone to his voice. “He’s been wanting help defining his specific emotions. I agreed to assist him.”

“Now?” I demanded.

“What better time?” Chet asked. “He is likely to be feeling a lot of strong emotions, after all.”

“We’ll do it quietly,” M-Bot promised.

Great. I didn’t believe that for a moment. Still, we continued on, entering Superiority territory. It didn’t look much different to me, though there were more fragments and they hung closer together. We flew straight toward the center, that enormous glowing white light. It felt as vast and intimidating as it ever had.

“Heads up, Broadsiders,” Peg said. “They’re incoming. Prepare for engagement.”

Her ship had a better scanner than mine; it took another two minutes for my sensors to see the oncoming ships. M-Bot counted them as they arrived, eventually settling on ninety-three ships. Slightly more than our numbers, and I didn’t see any retrofitted civilian ships among them. Hopefully Peg was right, and we had the better pilots.

Regardless, my excitement built. And the excitement was pure—no tension, no worry. A chance to fly and fight. A huge battle. I was ready.

“That’s odd,” Shiver said over the comm. “Captain, you see that?”

“Yeah,” Peg said. “Everyone, zoom your displays out.”

My proximity display expanded, revealing a larger view of the nearby fragments. Two just ahead of us were unnaturally close. They were going to bump...no, collide.

“Captain?” RayZed said. “Didn’t you...say that collisions between fragments were incredibly rare?”

“I did,” Peg replied.

“Now we’re encountering a second one, only a day after the last. Is... something wrong?”

“Can’t say,” Peg told us. “But...words. I’m pulling up IDs on some of those enemies. It appears the Cannonade Faction has come to join the party after all.”

I frowned until M-Bot’s scans indicated a group of new ships flying in to enter the fight. It was the Cannonade Faction. But they didn’t join us—instead they swooped around and fell in with the Superiority.

“Wonder how much they were paid to grow those *flivis*,” Semm grumbled. “Does Vlep *really* think the Superiority will keep whatever promises they made him?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Peg said on the wide comm. “Just a few more easy targets—and a few traitors to embarrass. Watch the debris from that collision—stay away from the fragments if you can. I don’t see the former champion on the scans, but he might be hiding in there somewhere. Do *not* engage if you spot him. Leave him to one of our aces.”

“He’ll come for me, Peg,” I said on a private line. “Hesho will want a rematch.”

“Bring down as many enemies as you can before it happens, Spin,” Peg said. “I think we’re better than they are—but I wouldn’t mind if you evened out our numbers.”

“Got it,” I said as we drew closer. Then the two groups finally broke, starfighters screaming toward one another—meeting right above those colliding fragments. My proximity sensor went ballistic as the landscapes impacted and chunks of rock began to break apart.

I grinned and launched into the middle of the chaos. It was so *liberating* to not have to worry about the safety of my companions. Cobb would have yelled at me for not bringing a wingmate, but here I could fly as I’d always secretly wanted to. Reckless. Free.

I lit up a ship in front of me, neatly blasting away its shield. That sent it into a series of panicked evasive maneuvers. Trusting my gut, I chased for a moment, then backed off and gave them space to screw up. They did just that, trying so hard to get away from me that they took a shot from Peg.

My grin widened as I dove to the side and shot down one, then two, then three enemy ships. Scud, this was *awesome*! I dove among the crazy mess, blue destructor blasts lighting the sky in all directions. M-Bot highlighted some enemies on the monitor: my reckless attacks had earned me two tails.

“So, let me see...” M-Bot said. “This emotion...is frustration at the crazed attack, mixed with the teensiest amount of fondness. And a desire to bonk her on the head with something that isn’t *too* heavy, but just heavy enough.”

“Vexation,” Chet said.

“Wow!” M-Bot said. “That’s perfect. Spensa is, like, vexation incarnate!”

“I thought you two said you’d be quiet,” I said.

“You’d rather not be able to hear us talk about you?” M-Bot asked.

Actually, no. I gritted my teeth in a half grin, half grimace and accelerated, diving to dodge the fire from our tails. At the risk of being called foolhardy, I pushed us low, weaving between parts of the landscape of one crumbling fragment.

Chet’s face on the corner of my screen looked a little pale. “How you doing back there, Chet?” I asked.

“Trying my best to enjoy the expert course in being vexed, Miss Nightshade!” he called. “I recognize this kind of fragment. It is from a twilight planet—those that grow in a dark solar system, feeding off a star that doesn’t glow brightly in the visible spectrum but still provides radiation.

“Those places tend to have plants and animals with much bioluminescence—and even a kind of mineral-luminescence. Judging from what I’ve seen, these rocks will likely explode in great showers of light if hit by destructor fire. Perhaps you can use that?”

Excellent. I spotted a hole in the breaking fragment ahead—and so I pushed for that. I wove up in a loop, then straight through the hole. My tails followed, but as I expertly wove between falling pieces of rock, their destructor shots hit on all sides of me. As Chet had suggested, the

explosions lit up like flares. Indeed, the falling debris acted like flak ejection, intercepting the disruptor fire.

So long as I didn't hit any big chunks, I'd actually be safer in here. Even as I was thinking that, I did hit one moderately sized chunk. Only one, and my shield deflected it.

"A sense of disbelief," M-Bot said, "mixed with an absolute expectation that something like this would happen. Because of course she'd dive through a radioactive, explosive natural minefield."

"Resignation," Chet said with a chuckle.

"Quiet, you two," I muttered as I pulled up and darted along underneath the ripping fragment, weaving between chunks of dropping earth. My two tails, blinded by the explosions, evidently lost track of me, as they broke off pursuit.

"That *was* well done, Spensa," Chet said.

"We're alive," M-Bot said. "And oddly, I feel—"

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Complain about my recklessness again."

"Actually," he said. "I'm feeling something different. A tremble of excitement...building to relief, and a...a desire to do the same thing *again*?"

"Ha!" I said. "You thought it was fun!"

"It *was*," M-Bot said. "Scud! Why did that feel fun? It was stupidly risky."

"A little risk is what makes it enjoyable, AI!" Chet said. "That is the part that is daring! The part that is exciting! Assuming one can fight down the nausea."

I looped around toward the main firefight, where I found Peg's slower ship being tailed by someone fairly skilled. I drilled them with three precise shots in a row, making them break off.

"Enjoying danger sounds like an evolutionary problem," M-Bot said. "Shouldn't you find things fun when they're safe?"

"Who knows?" I said. "I don't think evolution was trying to create me. I just kind of happened."



“Evolution doesn’t ‘try’ to do anything,” M-Bot said. “But like it or not, you are the pinnacle of its work. All evolutionary pressures throughout all the ages among your species have resulted in you.”

“Bet it feels embarrassed,” I said, finally shooting the ship that had been chasing Peg. It locked up and slowed, soaring idly through the battlefield. “Like that time all the parents got together to watch their kids march when I was in school, and my mother was forced to admit to the other moms that I was the one who’d glued her homemade suit of wooden ‘power armor’ to her uniform.”

“I wish I’d known you back then,” M-Bot said. “You sound like such a capricious child.”

“Uh, yeah. Child.”

I’d been sixteen.

“Where *is* Hesho?” I asked, looking over the battlefield. “Any signs of him yet on the scanners?”

“No,” M-Bot said. “But with this much debris flying around, my sight isn’t as precise as I’d like. He could be hiding in there somewhere.”

“Ship coming in from the right, Spensa,” Chet warned.

I dodged to the side—but as soon as that pilot realized who I was, they broke off the chase. I light-lanced around a chunk of acclivity stone that was floating upward from the crashing fragments, then fell in behind the fleeing ship. If the pilot was frightened of me, that would work to my advantage.

Once, I might not have found this battle enjoyable. I was of a higher skill level than these pilots—and I did love a challenge. As I matured though, I was beginning to realize that *all* combat was a challenge. Merely staying alive was challenging in a chaotic mess like this, where ships were darting in every direction and destructor blasts flew like embers in the forges. I felt alert, engaged.

As my prey dodged past some floating rubble, my proximity sensor beeped. A ship had been hiding in there, and it darted out as I passed, falling in behind me. One with a familiar design: small cockpit, large weapons signature.

Hesho had set a trap for me.

“Well hello, former champion,” Chet said. “About time you showed up.”

“Slight nausea,” M-Bot said. “Something I really shouldn’t be able to feel. Mixed with uncertainty.”

“That one’s apprehension,” I said, grinning. “Stomp it dead, M-Bot. This is going to be fun.”

I broke away from the chase. Hesho followed me, and the ship I’d been tailing immediately swung around and joined him. I’d beaten Hesho in our previous meeting, so while he obviously wanted a rematch, he’d brought a wingmate for support. There was no dishonor in pitting two against one in a battle like this—that was how the game was played.

The two flew as if to isolate me from the rest of the battle, herding me outward. If I tried to turn, one or the other moved to cut me off. I’d been in this situation before several times, fighting the Krell. In fact, I felt like maybe I’d taught Hesho this maneuver—a way to cull a ship from a battle and deal with it. In a big firefight, it was often preferable to have your ships fly defensively while a few “kill teams” of expert aces shrank the enemy numbers.

Well, I needed to make the fight a little less fair. Or make it unfair in my direction. I dodged right, risking a hit to my shield—and indeed I took one—to avoid being corralled. In a two-on-one fight, chaos favored me, and so I wanted to be in the thick of the shooting.

M-Bot helpfully popped up a tally of ships still fighting, proving that the pirates were holding their own, even making a little headway into the enemy lead. I—

*A building* appeared in the air directly in front of me.

Scud! I veered to the side, and my shield scraped the edge of the giant floating structure, shattering its windows in my wake as I skimmed one face of it.

“What the hell was *that*?” Chet asked.

“I don’t—”

*Another* building appeared at my side, tall and rectangular. Then something else flashed and materialized directly ahead of me. Was that...a swimming pool? I managed to duck around it, but it spun in the air, dumping a wave of *water* over us.

“A sudden spike of fear!” M-Bot said. “And general paralysis! I know this one myself! Panic! What is happening?”

A pair of scrubber tools folded from the sides of my canopy and ran across the curved surface, wiping away the water. Any other time, the news that my ship had rain wipers would have been amusing to me. I’d never fought in rain before, as we didn’t have it on Detritus.

However, it was completely overshadowed by, you know, the *buildings*. “Peg?” I shouted over the comm as a hovercar appeared some distance in front of me. “You seeing this?”

“Seeing it,” she said on a wide channel. “Not quite believing it. We’re in the middle of a warp of new objects entering the nowhere—never seen one of these in person. Careful, everyone. I don’t want to have to scrape any of you off the side of a building.”

Scud. I felt a...strange sensation. A stretching—or that’s the best I could explain it.

“Delver attack,” Chet guessed. “In the somewhere! That’s what is bringing all this in here—a delver has gone to your dimension, and as it strikes, it’s warping the city into this place. You don’t...recognize these structures, do you?”

“Thankfully no,” I said. “This isn’t happening on Detritus.” But yeah, I guessed he was right. The stretching sensation was the nowhere opening, being punctured as the delvers shoved things from my dimension in here.

“Deep breath, deep breath,” M-Bot said. “Okay, analysis says these structures appear to be Superiority designs.”

Why would they be attacking one of their own? Perhaps a planet that was in rebellion? The light next to Peg’s name changed, indicating she’d moved to a private line. “Damnedest thing here, Spin. Not one, but *two* explosive fragment collisions, and now this... Ha! Really feels like the nowhere is trying to get us, eh?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. My proximity sensor pinged, the display showing that Hesho and his wingmate had avoided the suddenly appearing buildings and were on my tail again. “Ha ha.”

“Don’t think too much of it,” Peg said. “It’s random, kid. I don’t want you getting any ideas that the Broadsiders grow *enguluns* or anything like that. We’re not unlucky. We found you, after all!” She cut the line.

“She’s wrong,” Chet said. “This is about us. The Path we’re walking. It has them angry.”

I veered to the side, narrowly avoiding another sudden building. It seemed that the process of shoving things into the nowhere was creating acclivity stone—as the stone blocks on one side of the building were making it hover. I’d heard you could magnetize metal by exposing it to a strong enough field; maybe this was something similar.

“You focus on flying,” Chet said. “I’m expanding my cytonic powers, and I *think* I can track the former champion and his wingmate. Even in this mess. I’ll give you warning if they try to ambush us again.”

“And I’ll suppress my outbursts for now,” M-Bot said. “Spensa...this is serious. Fly well, please.”

“Will do,” I said, veering carefully so I wouldn’t overwhelm the GravCaps. Chet had promised me he could take the g-forces—but I still wanted to be cautious. If I blacked out when buildings were appearing all around us...

“My scans indicate these buildings are uninhabited,” M-Bot said. “And they look old and run-down.”

As I flew, I tried to pick out what I could with my burgeoning cytonic senses. I felt the delvers, connected to one of their kind in the somewhere. And I overheard...annoyance, but not anger. They didn’t hear “noise” at the moment. They were...performing.

“It’s a test,” I said. “Winzik finally got smart and decided to try the delvers out on an unpopulated location, to see if they really were under control.”

“Perfect chance for them to throw a city at us,” Chet said.

Fortunately, the delver efforts didn't seem precise—objects started appearing all through the battlefield, not merely in front of me. If they'd been able to control this exactly, they would have made something appear so close to me that I couldn't dodge.

"The former champion is coming back around," Chet said. "He's staying close to fool scanners, but I can echolocate him there. He should soon emerge from behind that office building to the left."

"Thanks," I said. As I was getting the hang of flying in here, for the next bit I was able to keep my attention on Hesho. He flew well, as I'd trained him, but his wingmate wasn't as skilled. They did manage to get vaguely on my tail, so I led the two of them around the side of an enormous building that had a large open space near the roof. Parking for ships, maybe?

As we rounded the building, I cut my speed and ducked inside. Hesho and his wingmate followed. The confines of the hangar were tight, but a huge window filling the entire far wall provided good visibility. I regretted my decision as both Hesho and his friend opened fire. There wasn't a lot of room to maneuver in here, and slowing bunched us up.

Their shots took down my shields, so I hit my IMP—hoping it would reach them—and then I smashed my ship out through the back window as destructor fire chased me.

"I think you only managed to catch one of them with that," M-Bot said. "The one who *isn't* Lord Hesho."

"Scud." I swooped down along the building, then speared the bottom corner with my light-lance and made an assisted turn—barely in time, as destructor fire sprayed behind me. I took the next three turns fast, darting through an increasingly busy junkyard of a battlefield.

Was...was that a cow?

I kept flying through the cluttered urban debris, pushing to get ahead of Hesho. But he stuck on me. His wingmate didn't have to; they could cut out of the chase at times and then swoop back in as we came around another direction. As long as Hesho was putting heat on me, I had to stay on the defensive.

I tried to loop around and pick off the wingmate, but Hesho unloaded a sequence of shots just ahead of where I had been planning to go—which forced me a different direction. Without a shield, I had to be extra cautious. So in seconds both of them were on me again.

Eventually one of those shots was going to land. I broke downward—flying among dropping chunks of rock and debris. Hesho wove behind me.

“Warning, Spensa,” Chet said. “I am tracking the wingmate, though it’s out of sight. I think Hesho has ordered the wingmate to fly around—they’re trying to pin us.”

Scud. He was correct. When I leveled out, I spotted the wingmate hovering there, ready to open fire while Hesho still pressed me from behind.

I dodged as best I could, and felt another stab of pride. I hadn’t taught Hesho this kind of advanced technique. But I liked to think that it was my foundation in combat teamwork that had led him to strategies like this.

I wove in and out of falling chunks of rock and hit my overburn, intending to run straight through the shots from the wingmate and hope none hit me. At that moment though, a spray of fire—seemingly out of nowhere—slammed into the wingmate, freezing the ship.

“We have arrived, Spin,” Shiver said over the comm. “I should think that you’d know better how to stay with a group. You motiles, always wandering off in random directions.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate the assist.”

Other ships came in to nip at the two resonants—chasing them back away from the mess of appearing buildings. Those were largely centered on me, so while the delvers weren’t precise, they could evidently lob things in my general direction.

I was glad Shiver and the others were mostly moving to the other side of the battlefield. As much as I’d have liked help against Hesho, I didn’t want the others flying in these dangerous confines. Honestly, I was worried most about Hesho himself—as long as he stuck on me, he was risking death.

I needed to stun him quickly, if I could. I gave chase, passing a couple of drifting ships, locked up—but with their shields reignited to protect from collisions. A Superiority tug was gliding in to pull them to safety, and nobody attacked it. Kind of like how you might leave an enemy medic alone on an Old Earth battlefield. I found the civility of it encouraging.

I pulled out of the lower debris field, then veered sharply as the air began to vibrate. A second later, a small *fragment* appeared just above me—a chunk of city stretching for hundreds of meters, marked with sidewalks and planters.

Right. Okay. I could handle this. I steered up over the edge of it and wiped the sweat from my hands. That maneuver had let Hesho get behind me again, unfortunately. He started firing, and I barely dodged.

It was time to see if I could exploit his muscle memory. I started a routine maneuvering sequence, one I'd drilled into him and the others as I'd trained them outside the delver maze. A warm-up meant to teach good fundamentals.

Hesho fell in behind me as I moved, and his disruptor shots trailed off. *Yes, I thought. You know this routine. You flew it with me dozens of times.*

"Why did he stop?" Chet asked.

I didn't respond, continuing the motion. Hesho inched forward, and I let him fall almost into my wingmate position. I'd been intending to break out of this maneuver unexpectedly and throw him off, maybe earning me a breather to reignite my shield. But this seemed to be triggering a memory in him.

Together we soared over the new fragment, no longer fighting. No longer worried about other ships—as we were getting increasingly distant from the others, who were staying away from the debris. I continued the motions. I could almost feel Hesho's longing, his thoughts stretching toward mine...

Then my mind went cold. It was like I'd been doused by a bucket of ice water. I pulled my ship back to be even with his, then glanced toward his cockpit. It was tinted dark, which prevented me from making out any of his features.

It wasn't dark enough, however, to obscure the two powerful white spots that were shining deep within the cockpit where Hesho's eyes would have been. The delvers had taken him.



# 34

Hesho broke out of our two-person formation, then flared his boosters and barreled away from me.

“Oh, scrud,” Chet said.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “What’s wrong?”

“Let her fly, AI,” Chet said as I fell into pace behind Hesho. “Something is very wrong.”

“What?” M-Bot asked.

“The delvers,” I said. “They...took him. His eyes are glowing white.”

Chet cursed softly. “I’d hoped we would be safe from such direct intervention in a group. We must be too spread out on this battlefield.”

I stayed on Hesho’s tail as he looped around and flew through the center of the large debris field of hanging buildings. The remaining fighters on both sides had moved to the perimeter, as it had gone from dangerous to insane to fly here, with chunks spinning and colliding like an asteroid field.

Two buildings smashed together ahead of us, spraying shards of glass like rain—and as I flew through it they snapped against my hull and canopy, reminding me that I’d never found a chance to reignite my shield.

Why did the delver want to fly through this? In the past, they’d chased me. Now this one wanted me to chase it?

Well, I was game. It wanted to see how good I was? Let it watch. I expertly trailed Hesho-delver. We darted down through the narrowing crack between a chunk of rock and a free-flying factory, then flew underneath the

still-crumbling fragments. That took us through a stream of falling water that was spraying from a building above.

Was this the delver actually flying? No...these maneuvers were familiar. Somehow it was leaning on Hesho's skills. Well, I was going to rise to its test. We soared between crashing pieces of rock, down alongside a falling roadway, through sprays of debris that clattered against my canopy.

Everything else faded, and I absently muted other comm chatter. Nothing mattered but me and the chase.

The delver tried increasingly difficult moves to get me to trip up. Soon I was sweating—my attention tight like a narrow scanner band. Just me, that ship, and the immediate terrain.

Hesho-delper miscalculated on a light-lance pivot and slammed into a big chunk of stone, side first. His shield fuzzed, briefly visible as it absorbed the brunt of the impact. I grinned as I took the turn without a problem. Another hit like that, and he'd...

He'd...be dead.

My focus shattered like glass. I was suddenly aware not merely of my immediate surroundings—the cockpit, my sweaty hands on the controls, Chet breathing heavily in the copilot seat, the beeping proximity sensor—but the battlefield as a whole. Falling rock, crumbling buildings, hanging acclivity stone chunks.

It wasn't just a series of obstacles anymore. It was a death trap. And this wasn't some contest to see how good I was.

My stunned recovery took a moment, during which we came dangerously close to hitting a piece of a falling building.

"Spensa?" M-Bot said. "The rest of the fighting has paused. Most of the ships on both sides have been locked up, but there are fifteen remaining functional fighters on the enemy side, while our side has twelve, including Gremm and Peg. But everyone has agreed to a cessation for now, as the battlefield is too dangerous. They want to make sure everyone locked up gets pulled out to safety before resuming."

Ahead, Hesho wove between falling chunks. He'd slowed, taunting me to follow. They wanted to coax me into danger. They were willing to throw

away Hesho's life for a chance to hurt me. I needed to end this chase. Now.

I grabbed the control sphere and started firing, causing Hesho to slam on his overburn and blast away. His ship's faster speed shouldn't matter among all this debris. Unfortunately, that same debris blocked my shots. I ended up pelting a chunk of acclivity stone—broken off what appeared to be a storefront.

As Hesho dodged, he took another collision from a falling piece of rock. His shield went down. Scud. Shooting at him was making him more reckless. I followed, uncertain what to do, my worry deepening—but Chet and M-Bot stayed quiet and gave me time to think. And as I did, memories returned to me out of the cloud that was my past. Flying with Hesho and the kitsen—and with Brade, Vapor, and Morriumur. Days spent training—memories I hadn't even realized I'd lost.

"M-Bot," I said, "open a line to his ship."

"Done," M-Bot said.

"Flight Fifteen," I snapped, trying to channel Cobb like I'd done when training Hesho and the others, "line up! Now!"

I backboosted, pulling my ship to a halt.

Ahead, Hesho's vessel slowed. How much did the delvers control, and how much was him? They needed his flying skill. Hopefully that meant they couldn't dominate him entirely.

He'd responded to my voice. His drill instructor. I searched through my clouded recollections of that day. Hadn't...hadn't Hesho had a different name for our flight?

"Flowers of Night's Last Kiss," I said. "Time to call roll! Fall in line, Hesho!"

Hesho's ship stopped and turned. I didn't wait—I sprayed him with destructor fire. I felt only a *tad* guilty. But my shots flew true, causing his ship to flash blue and lock up.

Behind me Chet released a loud, relieved breath. "Nice flying," he said softly.

"A soothing calm," M-Bot said. "Like I've just been serviced with a nice fresh can of lubricant. I'll call it repose."

“We’re not done yet,” I said. Using maneuvering thrusters, I inched over to his ship—close enough that we nearly bumped one another amid the falling debris.

His canopy flashed and went transparent, the tint fading. He sat in there, those eyes glowing white, facing toward me in his little seat. His teeth bared. I pressed my mind forward, ignoring the way the delver behind him screamed at me. I saw deep inside it.

And there I found *fear*.

“Chet, take the controls,” I said. “Don’t let us drift apart.”

“As you ask,” he said. “But...why?”

In response I popped my cockpit, hoping my guess was correct.

“Spensa?” M-Bot said. “This...is very odd behavior.”

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “Chet, if I slip and fall, try to grab me or something.”

“Uh—”

I climbed out of the cockpit and stepped onto my ship’s wing. From there, I felt a strange sense of disorientation—buildings floating overhead, tumbling in the sky. Two crumpled fragments locked together from their collision, spinning slowly. A white glow to my right: the lightburst looking on us through debris-filled space.

I was standing at the crossroads of infinity, without lifeline or safety rope. Chet used maneuvering thrusters to keep the wing steady as I inched over to Hesho’s craft. Then, before I could think better of it, I jumped.

I landed square on Hesho’s smaller fighter. It was more than large enough to hold me up, even if the cockpit wasn’t much bigger than a flight helmet. I leaned down, stared at him through the now-clear canopy, and stoked the star inside me. The me-ness. I let it shine out cytonically, invisible to conventional sight.

Hesho-delper cringed away, pure white eyes open and glowing bright enough that I couldn’t make out his other features.

“Why are you so afraid of me?” I said. “What is it that I don’t know yet that makes you act this way?”

*You must return to us the Us you separated, noise.* It was a deliberate attempt to get me to think of something else, judging by what my “listening” was telling me. *Give them back.*

“Look,” I said, “can’t we *please* talk about this? What you’re doing to me? And my people?”

*This corrupts*, they sent me. I understood the implication—they meant that talking to me, interacting, risked changing them. They tried to withdraw, but I...latched on. With my growing cytonic senses, I grabbed hold of the delver. It was like Brade had done to me.

Except I was far, far weaker. I held on only barely. Either I didn’t have a talent for this, or I needed a ton more practice. Still, even that little attempt *panicked* the delver. This brought the full brunt of their attention, fear, and hatred upon me. In that moment others gathered, and they tried to destroy me in the only way they knew how.

By trying to make me one of them.

I was pulled into the nowhere entirely. I became formless; I had no body, merely a mind floating in not darkness—as it normally was—but an infinite whiteness. Everything around me was white because it was *full*, packed with the delvers. Like an ocean is filled with water.

They saw *me* as a corrupted version of *them* now. Cytonics were like delvers. In a way, I was a cousin to them. They saw me as a tempter also, luring them toward their destruction with crass things like *linearity* and *individuality*.

Their minds assaulted me, and pushed me to see as they did. To see the peace, the harmony, of shared existence. I clung to my individuality, but it was frayed, worn, like a battle standard that had been shot full of holes. In seconds, what scraps of memories I still had left of my friends and family had frayed further, and my life in the somewhere began to vanish entirely.

They wanted to erase it. Because of...pain? Yes, they *knew* pain, from the past, but had escaped it. I latched onto this. It was a clue, or a seed of one. Yet...it was terrifying how I responded to their offer. To the peace, the blending of self, the eternity without pain—there could be no pain without

the passage of time. There could be no anger when everyone agreed absolutely on everything.

I can't really explain why that was so entrancing. I can't even explain what it felt like—how do you describe such a thing? I was just a pilot. Without the right words.

I didn't *want* to succumb to them. But I also had difficulty fighting. In a panic I stretched out, searching for help. Perhaps from my friends? Whose names I was forgetting... Whose faces...blended...into white...

And then, something.

Support from someone distant. A...friend? That comforting mind that was somehow my pin. The one that I was increasingly certain was my father. It bolstered me and brought with it images. The delightful scent of water dripping in the caverns back home. The calming purpose of tinkering on M-Bot's ship with Rig. My mother's exhausted smile, after a long day of work, upon seeing me. Gran-Gran's steady voice speaking of the heroines of the past.

Then another mind, from the other side. A mind that reminded me of things I loved. Exploring. Flying. Stories. Existing was pain, but it was also *joy*. With those memories bolstering me, I stoked myself.

My star came alight. I wasn't *nothing* here. I was Spensa, and my soul was fire. It exploded with brightness, and I offered that sense of myself to them—I bludgeoned them with who I was, and the emotions I felt.

They pulled away at that offer of corruption. At the offer of...of *dissention*. They retreated, though our exchange had told us a great deal about one another. As the sensation faded, I found another offer. A...truce.

Within me, they found my longing for my friends to stop dying. They'd seen my excitement for the battles I'd found in the belt of the nowhere.

*Stay...the delvers pled with me. Stay and do not pass Surehold. We will stop.*

Stay? I blinked, becoming aware of the space around me. I was hanging on to Hesho's ship, looking down into those portals of light that were his eyes.

*Stay.* It wasn't a word, but an impression—of me stopping my journey on the Path of Elders. Of staying at Surehold, or moving back out into the belt, but going no farther inward than the Superiority base. Of not continuing the Path of Elders or entering the lightburst.

*What about my friends?* I sent them. *The people in the somewhere.*

*In truce with you, we leave them alone. We ignore the noise.* That particular use of “noise” indicated Brade and Winzik. It wasn't as strong a promise as I'd have preferred—it felt like from the way their minds worked, if they were pulled into our realm they'd still attack. But they *would* start ignoring Winzik.

*Stay,* the delvers repeated, the white fading from Hesho's eyes. *Stay away. And we promise truce.*

With that, the light vanished completely—leaving me clinging to the outside of a frozen ship containing one *very* confused kitsen.

# 35

I slumped into the cockpit of my ship.

That had been...a lot. A lot to think about, a lot to feel. A lot to remember.

Scud, I remembered. Gran-Gran, Mother, Rig. Even Jorgen, though the faces of my other friends remained vague.

"I told you that I understood crazy," Chet said. "I was wrong. Thank you for the master class."

"Spensa?" M-Bot said. "That was...interesting of you. Do you want a list of the emotions I'm feeling right now?"

"I get the sense they'd mostly be variations on frustration and bafflement."

"You'd be right," he replied.

"I'll pass, then," I said, as I closed the cockpit. "Come on, you two. Climbing out on my wing in the middle of a battlefield? You've both seen me do worse."

"Which is why I didn't call it strange," M-Bot said. "Strange implies odd, or out of sequence with your normal behavior. Still, um... What the hell?"

I grinned. "Wow. You used that curse perfectly, M-Bot."

"It's the emotions," he said. "I now understand the sense of frustration everyone else feels with you! It dovetails perfectly into exasperation, which makes me *finally* understand why it is people swear at you so much!"

"That's great!" I said.



“I know! Also: *WHAT THE HELL, SPENSA?*”

“Hesho was possessed by a delver,” I said.

“Yes, Chet explained that,” he said. “So you went *closer?*”

“They’re afraid of me, M-Bot. I realized it...and it just felt right...”

“Right isn’t a feeling. Trust me, I’ve been practicing. Weren’t you listening?”

“Right *is* a feeling for me,” I said. “At least this time when I got out of the cockpit, I didn’t end up floating around in a vacuum. Chet, how much of that did you hear?”

“Not a lot,” he said. “My cytonic communication talents are not as powerful as yours.”

“Well,” I said, “immortality and the ability to cytonically echolocate are both also cool.”

“I didn’t say they weren’t,” he replied. “I did have enough skill to sense you in pain—and their attack. I tried to feed you memories of yourself. It appears to have helped. After that they left, though I couldn’t sense why.”

*I should tell him*, I thought. But the delvers’ parting thoughts—*stay, truce*—haunted me. I first wanted to think about what it all meant. “M-Bot,” I said. “Please open a comm line to Hesho.”

He sighed, but complied.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you feeling?”

“I meditate upon the emptiness that is my past,” Hesho said softly. “And about how, despite it being blank, I *know* you were part of it. We were... friends?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Was I the leader of a pirate force?” he asked.

“Not exactly. Why do you ask?”

We floated together, but fortunately the flashes of buildings and other junk entering the nowhere had stopped. Much of it—the chunks with acclivity stone at least—drifted around us. Lazy, almost serene, like we were underwater in a vast ocean following some terrible storm.

“When the Cannonaders took me captive,” Hesho explained in his deep authoritative voice, “I immediately tried to seize command of their

organization. I *felt* I should be their leader. They thought I was ‘cute’ and attempted to use me as a mascot instead. I...disabused them of this behavior.”

I grinned, trying to imagine how that had looked. What did a tiny fox man a quarter meter tall do to “disabuse” pirates?

“Eventually,” he said, “I settled into my role as an expert pilot and followed Vlep. But something about it felt wrong. There were embarrassing holes in my piloting skill. So I wondered. Perhaps I was a leader of a group of pirates who maybe hadn’t flown in a long time?”

“You were commander of a ship, Hesho,” I explained. “Your kind can crew a small capital ship that isn’t much bigger than a starfighter for the rest of us. You at least occasionally piloted it yourself, which is why you learned some skills—but you had crew working things like the shields for you.”

“Aaah...” he said. “That thought...it wears a path in my mind, champion. Light sparks, like stone and steel. My ship...the...*Swims Against the Current in a Stream Reflecting the Sun?*”

“Yes!”

“I see it like a faded picture exposed to the elements,” Hesho said. “But...I *can* remember my home. The feeling of it warm on my face and fur. Yes. Being with you is good for me. I will remain with you, champion, and serve you as your bodyguard until you return to me who I was.”

“Uh... You’re my friend. You don’t need to—”

“I am your sworn companion,” he said firmly, “and you my feudal lord. Do not object to this arrangement. It is done.”

I sighed. I’d been about to explain to him that he was an emperor, but perhaps it wasn’t wise to give him more ammunition. Only Hesho could become someone’s servant using a forcible imperial declaration. Still, I could do worse than having a dedicated gerbil-fox samurai following me about. And it *was* encouraging that Hesho could remember the name of his ship now.

I stuck him with a light-lance and towed him up through the debris toward where the others were waiting. As we flew, I grappled with what the delvers had told me.

*They want me to stop following the Path of Elders, I thought. Which is an obvious sign that I should continue.*

Yet...if I could make them break their pact with Winzik... It was a compelling offer. Assuming I could trust them.

I found myself conflicted, and determined that I shouldn't make a decision in the middle of a battle. I put the thoughts aside for the moment, and emerged from the biggest clot of debris to find most of the other pirates lined up in two rows of deactivated ships, maintained by the tugs that would eventually reactivate them. The remaining active ships were a little ways off, also in two groups.

As I arrived, a group of ships peeled off from the enemy faction. Vlep, commander of the Cannonade pirates, and a few of his crew were leaving. Apparently seeing me defeat their best pilot a second time meant they'd had enough.

"Give us immunity, Peg," Vlep's voice said over the comm. "Let me take my downed ships, and I'll leave."

"What!" another voice shouted, in what I thought was the heklo language. "Our deal!"

"You should know better than to make deals with pirates, Lorn," Vlep said. "What say you, Peg?"

"Done," Peg said immediately.

Other members of the pirates who had joined with us grumbled, but Peg was making the correct decision. Vlep and his traitors weren't our ultimate goal. Without them, there would only be ten working ships on the Superiority's side. We had thirteen. And it was obvious which was the more skilled force.

Vlep hovered over to try to attach a light-lance to Hesho's ship. However, Hesho's voice came on the comm. "I have been bested a second time," he said. "And in the name of honor, I have chosen to join the new champion as her sworn companion."

Vlep cursed softly. "You would so easily break with your allies, Darkshadow?"

“I have made no oaths,” Hesho said. “You are not my liege. Indeed, your treatment of me when I first arrived is among the only memories I hold. Be glad I warned you of my shift in allegiance. We are now enemies. Should we meet again, I shall reveal to you the consequences of my anger.”

Vlep retreated without responding, following the others off the battlefield. I joined the line of active pirate ships facing down the small group of Superiority forces.

“All right, Lorn,” Peg said over a wide broadcast. “You want to just surrender now?”

“You know I can’t do that,” his voice replied.

“They’re never going to let you out of here, Lorn,” Peg said. “They don’t care about you. Why are you still loyal?”

“You know they have my family.”

“So we squeeze them,” Peg said. “We withhold their acclivity stone until they agree to send through your family. They pretend they have the power in this relationship, but so long as we *own* this place—and make it our home—they lose every bit of bargaining power they have.”

There was silence on the line for a moment, and I leaned forward, hands on my controls. We could end this easily, with the odds in our favor.

Peg waited though. No signal to attack.

That heklo voice spoke again. “You promise to do this for me?” he asked. “For anyone they’re holding? You’ll get them brought through so we can be together?”

“My word and oath,” Peg said. “But you have to turn the facility over to me. All security codes. All access.”

Silence again. Finally, the heklo continued. “There are a few people among the base security officers who I’m nearly certain are Superiority agents sent to watch me. We’ll have to move quickly and isolate them until we can make sure.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Peg said. “I’ve got a plan. Do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal.”

# 36

**A** short time later, Shiver, Dllllizzzz, and I flew in low toward the Superiority base—escorting Peg, her sons, and Lorn. The rest of the unfrozen pirate vessels formed an ominous presence higher in the sky.

Surehold turned out to be bigger than I'd expected. The campus sprawled across an unusually large and thick fragment marked by hills and rocky crags. I counted four separate acclivity stone quarries, each attended by a variety of modern machines. The central section of the base comprised about a dozen buildings, and while it wasn't large in comparison to the crowded Starsight, it was almost as big as the entire DDF headquarters.

After making certain their large antiaircraft guns were offline—control transferred to Peg—we landed and let her and Lorn disembark. Curious workers stopped on the flight deck to watch, though Lorn—the base commander—waved a winged arm to calm them. Together Lorn, Peg, and her two sons entered a nearby building, the base security structure. Inside she could be given full and permanent control over the base, with her own overrides and passwords.

After a tense few minutes—during which I stood ready to blast open the wall and try to grab Peg if something went wrong—a call to quarters went out on the Superiority channel. Martial law was declared. Peg's sons prowled out of the building a moment later, armed and armored, with Lorn guiding them. They'd secure the few people on base he thought would be trouble.

Quick as that, it was done. I hadn't expected there to be trouble—the real fight had been the one with starfighters. We'd left most of the Superiority pilots in their ships, which were locked up without friendly tugs to unfreeze them, guarded by trustworthy pirate flights.

Still, I remained on watch—hovering—for another half hour as Peg and her sons took full command of the base. Finally, as the word came that all was clear, some of the pirates began to land on the flight pad. Hesho settled down beside us in his own ship, but didn't move to leave it.

I glanced back at Chet. "What do you think?" I asked.

"It's looking good," he said. "But if anything were to go wrong, this would be the time—when we're flat-footed and assume we've won."

"Agreed."

So the two of us, paranoid as we were, waited another good half hour. But it seemed that the final stage of Peg's plan had indeed gone off without a hitch. As the pirates unloaded from their ships, Peg's voice came over our comms and the flight deck loudspeakers.

"No looting," she ordered. "This is our home now. Regular base personnel have been confined to quarters; if you encounter a locked room, leave it alone. But you're free to investigate the place, pick an empty room in the barracks to claim as your own, all that fun stuff. Just be warned. I get word of you harming base personnel or breaking stuff, and I'll be...upset."

Most of the pirates made for the barrack building. I asked Hesho to stay put and keep watch while Chet and I climbed free, then Chet pointed toward a large set of doors ahead of us. The shipping warehouse, where the portal would be.

*You still here?* I sent to my pin. I'd confirmed, upon coming close, that it was here.

I got back a contented, quiet impression. *Hiding now. Seek me later.*

Okay... Well, I had a job to do at the moment anyway. Chet used some controls to open the large bay doors of the warehouse, revealing a vast room with a tall ceiling. It felt vacuous despite the other end being piled high with raw acclivity stone waiting to be shipped to the Superiority.

On the wall closest to us was the portal. It was much larger than the others I'd seen in here—covering a square that looked about six meters on each side. Chet and I stood there staring at it for a good long while. As I started toward it, Chet put his hand on my shoulder.

"Miss Nightshade," he said. "Might I inquire what the delvers told you? Before they left?"

"They...offered me a truce," I admitted. "They want me to proceed no farther inward than Surehold. The next step on the Path would take us that way, wouldn't it?"

"Almost assuredly."

"Well, they don't want me doing that. They made a promise. If I stay here, they'll leave me alone."

"And your people in the somewhere?"

"They implied they'd halt attacks, though it wasn't clear if they understood completely what that means. They *did* promise to stop listening to Winzik and Brade—the two people they'd earlier made a deal with on the enemy's side."

Chet sighed and settled down on a box. He suddenly looked old to me, his mustache drooping and in need of a wax, his skin...wan. He gave me a smile, but something about him seemed worn out. And when he spoke, some of the facade—the persona—had faded, leaving a normal man.

"That's a good offer," he said. "Better than I ever thought they'd make. They're frightened."

"That's what I decided as well," I said, pacing before him in the cavernous warehouse, helmet under my arm. "Which makes me think I should refuse the offer. They're desperate. I should keep doing what I'm doing, because it's worrying them."

"Except?"

"Except ostensibly, I came in here to find a way to stop them! And now I've found it. Shouldn't I take it? Isn't it my *duty* to at least try this?"

Chet nodded slowly.

I paced back the other direction. "How trustworthy are they, do you suppose?"

“I’m not sure I can say,” he replied. “I do get the sense that they live in the moment, but I know they also never change. So as long as they continue to be afraid of you, they should continue wanting the same thing—which means they’d persist in upholding any promise they made.”

“That’s not as strong as I’d like,” I said. “But...yeah, that makes sense. They don’t have honor—it’s not a thing they even comprehend. And they *are* backing out of a promise they made to Winzik. They could do the same to me.”

I paced back the other way, arms folded. This felt like a lot to put on one person still in her teens. How did *I* decide what could be the fate of not merely my people, but the entire galactic civilization?

“It feels like I should at least try them out,” I said. “If I can remove the delvers from the war... Scud, it would mean so much. It’s more than any pilot, no matter how skilled, could ever hope to accomplish.

“But if I take their deal, what then? Do I go back to the somewhere? How? Sneak through this portal into a Superiority base?”

“You’d need to remain a threat to the delvers,” Chet said. “Always on the cusp of doing the thing they’re afraid you’ll do—that is the best chance at keeping them honest.”

I nodded, though my stomach fell a little. That meant remaining in the nowhere, at least until the war against the Superiority was won. Could I really do that? I paced back the other direction.

“I worry that this is the wrong time to make concessions to the delvers,” I said. “Beyond that, our biggest advantage against Winzik is the fact that his coup is still relatively new. He’s securing power, Jorgen says—and doesn’t have full control yet. This seems the best time for me to press forward, continue learning about my powers. Exploit the fact that our enemies’ balance of power is unstable.”

“A difficult position,” Chet said. “Could I maybe...offer you another option? I don’t want to complicate the issue further, but I find I must speak.”

I glanced across at him, sitting on the box. He gave me a smile. Not an overly cheerful, toothy explorer’s smile. A tired, hopeful smile.



“What?” I asked.

“Come with me, Spensa,” he said, “and explore the nowhere.”

I froze in place.

“As I’ve been wandering alone,” he said, “I’ve started wishing I could pass on some of what I know. Wishing for a student, someone who shared my enthusiasm, my love of all things new and exciting. What if we didn’t continue on the Path of Elders? What if we turned away and just went off on our own?”

“We could see what the farthest reaches hold! I’ve heard of distant fragments with creatures that sound strikingly similar to dragons! I’ve heard of water fragments full of caverns with air pockets, connected by transparent stone!”

Some of his old boisterousness returned, and his voice changed, more clipped—with a faint accent—as he stepped up to me. “Spensa,” he said, “we have an entire *galaxy* in microcosm. Worlds to explore. We could even return back here to Surehold on occasion. Scratch that flying itch! Spend time with the Broadsiders. Why, you could teach me to fly again! I show you a galaxy, and you show me who I used to be! A pilot, yes, and presumably friends to an AI. Me! Ha!

“Wouldn’t that be incredible, Spensa? Wouldn’t it be *amazing*? We could watch the delvers, see that they don’t attack your friends. As you guessed, they’ll be *much* more likely to keep their word if you’re within striking distance of continuing your quest. You wouldn’t be giving it up. No, merely a delay! A little...time off. To travel this wondrous place.”

It hit me like a punch to the stomach.

During my travels in here—the exploration and the fighting alike—something had been building in me. A sense of disconnect between the person I *was* becoming and the person I’d always *imagined* myself becoming.

In that moment, I was shocked—physically—by how badly I wanted to stay. I *really* loved it here. Exploring the belt? Going on grand adventures? And beyond that, fighting in the sky without the stress of losing those I loved? Being a hero, the best pilot in *literally* the entire universe?

“It sounds so nice,” I said to Chet. “Exploring, dueling...like...”

“Like a story?” he said softly.

I nodded. “Why do we remember the stories, Chet, but not our families? Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I wish I did.”

Together we turned to face the portal looming on the far wall. When I’d joined the DDF as a pilot, I’d imagined glorious battles and storybook heroism. I’d imagined new worlds to conquer. Instead I’d found pain. Friends dying. People struggling at the end of their stretched-thin nerves. I’d found complications, anger, fear.

I’d discovered I wasn’t a hero. Not like in the stories. But here...I *could* be that. And it felt so, so very right for me to stay and claim it. This place sang to me, like beautiful music from Old Earth. It vibrated my soul.

Didn’t I deserve to stay? Hadn’t I done enough? I’d saved Detritus from the bomb, and then from the delver. Wasn’t that enough for one woman? And now I had the chance to escape into a story...all the while providing a vital service to my people. I traded my future in the somewhere for holding back the destructive force of the delvers.

It was perfect. Except.

Jorgen. My friends. Could I...

“Chet,” I said, “you’ve always been afraid of the Path of Elders. Why?”

“I worry that if I walk it,” he said, “I’ll stop being myself.”

“Why?”

“Because every path we walk changes us, Spensa,” he answered. “This one more than most. Please, just think about my offer. Let’s not rush into this. There’s no harm in taking a few hours, is there?”

“No,” I said. “No, there’s not.”

He squeezed my shoulder in thanks, then bowed—something I don’t think anyone non-kitsen had ever done to me before—and quietly withdrew. I sat down on a box, looking at the portal. It felt wrong to be here and not discover what it had inside it. Yet...I hesitated.

It felt like I should know before I continued. Scud. Was I really thinking about turning away now?

Yes. I was. I remembered the pure joy of “sailing” across that ocean fragment with M-Bot and Chet. I remembered the thrill of discovering ruins that humans had built. I had *loved* the fights against Hesho, at least before buildings began appearing around me.

Being here was living an adventure. While being in the somewhere was... It was about pain. And scud, deep down, I realized I was *so tired*.

I’d been running since I could remember. Dashing from disaster to disaster. Desperately working to get into flight school, fixing M-Bot in secret, being a double agent on Starsight, confronting the delver...

It had worn me thin. Yet in here I’d found wonder, adventure, and excitement.

I sat there for a time, until footsteps scraping stone made me spin around. A large figure lumbered my direction, wearing a plumed hat. Peg smiled at me as she stepped up, a gun slung over her thick shoulder.

“The base is ours,” she told me. “Well and truly. I almost can’t believe it.”

“You earned it, Peg,” I said. “That was an amazing plan you put together.”

“Thank you,” she said, grinning. She nodded toward the portal. “Find what you wanted?”

“Both yes and no,” I said softly. “I’m honestly not sure yet.”

“I...heard that you might be staying.”

I glanced at her, frowning. In turn, she gestured toward the top of the wall. “Cameras,” she said. “I saw you two going this way, and had to make sure you didn’t accidentally open the portal and reveal what we’d done to the Superiority. I’m sorry to not give you and Chet privacy, but this is too valuable an asset for that.”

Right. Security officer. I tried not to feel offended. I mean, I hadn’t asked her to leave us alone—and she had a point about the portal.

“What would it take,” Peg said to me, “to get you to stay with the Broadsiders?”

I sighed. “I don’t know, Peg,” I said. “This is all a little overwhelming right now.”

“Fair enough,” she replied. “Grow *igandels* in thought—it is a good time. While you do, let me ask you something. Do you know why I was willing to come in here when no one else was? I knew the truth of what the Superiority was doing here. Not letting people out. Forced labor in another dimension. I came anyway. You curious to know why?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Out there, I was a killer,” Peg said, her voice softer. “In here was a new life. A fresh life. I didn’t know I was pregnant with my boys; that might have changed my mind. All I wanted was an escape from my old life, and coming in here offered it.

“Things out there are messy, Spin. Everybody arguing, fighting. Killing. But a lot of the things they argue over, well, they don’t matter in here. We don’t need food, and there’s plenty of space. Politics...ideology...those are things we can make up for ourselves in here. We can make this place whatever we want it to be.”

She turned, waving toward the complex. “I’ve known for years now that if I could just get this base—grab it by the throat and start building it up as a *home*, not a *prison*—we could make it wonderful. We could make a society. I want you to help me do that.”

“But Chet wants me to go exploring with him,” I said.

“I know, and I think that’s an excellent idea!” Peg said. “I’d want to put you on that kind of assignment frequently, between training seasons. Do you know what is out there? Past the empty stretches?”

“No.”

“I don’t either,” Peg said. “It’s hard to fly that far; when you hit the enormous gap between fragments it starts eating up your ashes, and you risk losing yourself. But I’ll tell you this—there are three other Superiority mining bases in the nowhere. I was given that information when I was applying for this job.”

“Only four total?” I said. “For the entire Superiority?”

“Exactly,” Peg said. “And this is the largest—which is why I’m certain they’ll meet my demands. But I’m also worried. If they use those other three bases—and somehow load them with enough reality ashes to cross the

empty stretches—I could still get invaded. Plus Vlep is still out there, a real danger.

“I need fighters. More importantly, I need *trainers* of fighters. Then I need someone crazy enough to go explore, to discover how to cross the vast gaps.” She looked back at me. “You are the right person, Spin. The somewhere is a mess. But the nowhere *can* be something better. I want you to help me make it so.”

I...

Scud, I didn’t need this too. Not after what Chet had said. I knew they hadn’t coordinated it; Peg was just acting at a convenient moment. I felt double-teamed regardless. Triple-teamed, actually. Chet. Peg.

And my own heart.

“I reserved one of the officer suites for you,” Peg said. “You don’t have to make any decisions. But for now, why not go grab a shower and relax a little? Think over your options. You can at least stay there until we locate Surehold’s reality icon, and I can give you those ashes I promised.”

I considered. And scud, she was right. I needed some time. Plus, a shower sounded *so* nice. I called M-Bot and Hesho to let them know, then went to the room Peg indicated. It was an enormous suite—of the ridiculous type.

Unfortunately, I didn’t get to the shower. I made the mistake of lying down on the bed first. And after the fighting, the chaos, the tension of my decision...I just found myself unable to stay awake.

And so I drifted off.

# INTERLUDE

**A**s I slept, someone tried to talk to me.

I wanted to talk to him.

Something stopped me.

It was another cloud, like before. Like the prison that Brade had put around me. Though...it felt different. Like a march set to different words. Same sounds. New song.

I fought through it, but no matter which way I turned, I got lost. I tried telling myself that none of this was real, that there were no places here. Nowhere to go. I merely had to...make myself be somewhere else...

It was hard to think through this fog.

“Spensa?” Jorgen’s voice. “Spensa, I can feel you.”

*I...I can't feel you...*

“You seem distant. Why? What is wrong?”

*I'm lost.*

“I can barely hear you. What was that?”

*Lost...*

“Spensa, things are tough right now. I... Everyone is looking to me for answers. I could use someone to talk to.”

He needed me. That need made the haze thinner, and I thought I saw the way. I moved toward it, but each footstep was sluggish. I was lost. Hadn't I been...warned...about that?

But I was tired.

Just. So. Tired.

Moments later, I was asleep.

# **PART**

# **FIVE**



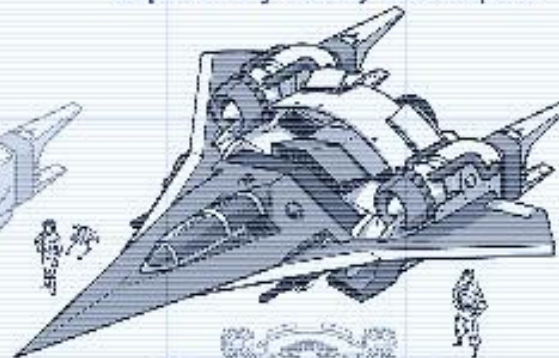
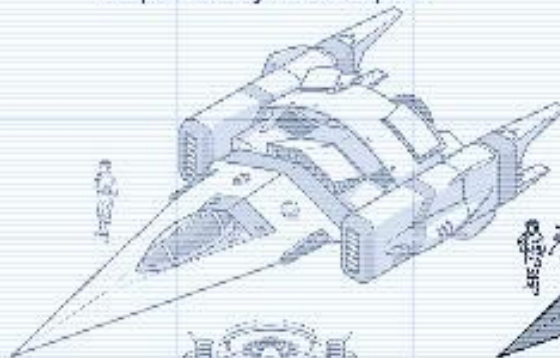


# Threat Assessment Analysis Record DST210503B

## ◦═══════════▶ Spensa's Ship ◁═══════════◦

Superiority Interceptor

Superiority Heavy Interceptor

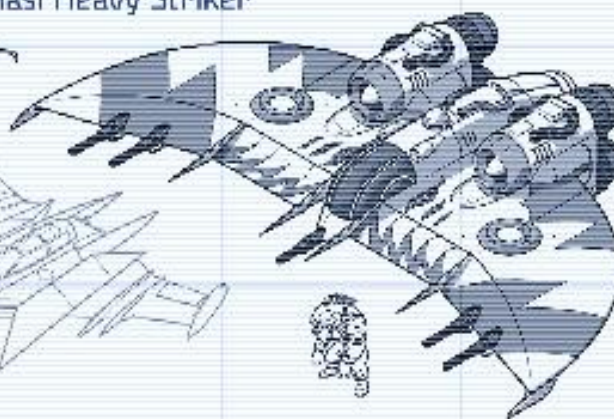
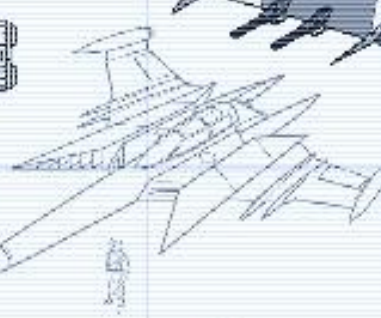


## ◦═══════════▶ Gremm's Ship ◁═══════════◦

Tenasi Heavy Striker



DDF Poco  
(scale reference)



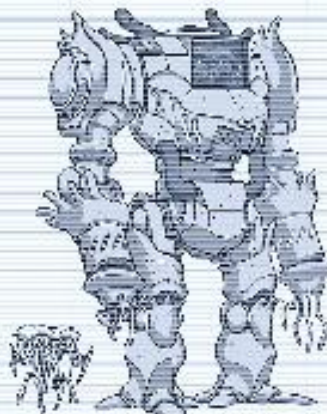
## ◦═══════════▶ Races ◁═══════════◦



Kitsen



Human



Varvax + Funckeletron



Resonant



Rurl



# 37

I awoke to luxury. I didn't think I'd slept a full night—but then again, I didn't know what “night” really meant in here. I yawned, feeling...unsettled by my dreams. As I considered, I looked to the side—and found Hesho sitting cross-legged on an oversized chair right next to the bed.

“I watched you in your sleep,” he said. “To make certain you were safe.”

Awesome.

I mean, yeah, I realized some people would have thought that was unsettling. Not me. Alien bodyguard watching for assassins? Scud, how could a girl *not* sleep more soundly under those circumstances?

“How long was I out?” I asked.

“An hour,” he said. “I wrote the time down to remember.”

“Clever,” I said to him. “I’m going to grab a shower. Maybe wait outside while I do?”

“I shall be on the balcony,” he said. “The view is excellent. I shall also send for the machine-who-thinks; he wished to be notified if you rose.”

A short time later, I walked out onto the balcony wearing a freshly laundered jumpsuit, my hair still drying. Hesho sat cross-legged on the floor here, in his warrior's coat and trousers, a small sword across his lap as he meditated. M-Bot's drone hovered out here too. He'd sent it up—interrupting me in the shower, actually. I hadn't been *too* indignant. I mean, in the past I'd cleansed literally inside his cockpit, so it's not like he hadn't seen me in that state.

I'd sent the drone out here anyway. It didn't contain his entire consciousness; he'd simply decided to start using it as, well, a drone was normally used.

I settled down on the floor of the balcony, my back to the glass door separating it from the bedroom, and looked out. Over the red rock hills, inward.

Toward the lightburst.

That blazing expanse appeared like an explosion frozen mid-detonation. A gigantic sphere of light that *felt* as if it should be consuming all nearby. It was distant, but closer than it had ever been.

I'd assumed it would be my ultimate destination in here. It was, after all, a way out. I'd crossed pirate territory; I'd helped subdue the Superiority. Now only one thing stood between me and the lightburst: the region of the belt called No Man's Land. The place where the delvers were strongest.

My short nap had only muddled things more. I remembered Jorgen's voice. I couldn't leave him, could I?

*It wouldn't be permanent, I thought. Just a...short break. A year or so. Exploring. Fighting. Keeping the delvers away.*

But in here, years seemed to have an eerie way of becoming decades. I felt...as if I were on the edge of a cliff.

I had to be honest with myself. The offer from the delvers wouldn't have been enough to keep me here, not alone. I had no reason to trust them, and every reason to press forward while my enemies were unstable. The desire to stay had far more to do with my own heart. And the emotions I felt growing there. Emotions that I couldn't help but see as cowardice.

I tried to imagine the heroes from the stories laughing at my sudden indecision. But strangely, I instead pictured them understanding. I...I'd been born into war. I'd barely had a childhood. My father had died in the fighting before my eighth birthday. My heart had been flayed by losing companions while flying, though I could no longer remember their names or faces.

I'd never had any other options in life. It was fight or be destroyed. But now I'd seen that wasn't the only way to live. It was the first time in my life

I'd actually had a chance to escape the war. I *had* to consider it. How could I not?

Neither Hesho nor M-Bot spoke for a time; the three of us merely sat in silence. We were like an audience for one of the military parades back home. Except our entertainment was the distant, incredible burst of light.

"Is that what a sun is like?" I finally asked.

"No," Hesho said. "I close my eyes, and the light batters my eyelids—but there is no warmth to accompany it. It is like the ghost of a sun. The corpse of one, left behind after all the heat has fled."

"It is a *little* like a sun," M-Bot said. So far Hesho had taken his presence as normal, though I'd cautioned the kitsen not to speak of him to others. "Only very wrong at the same time. It is much smaller than one, for example."

"That's *small*?" I asked. From how close we were, the lightburst took up a good chunk of the horizon.

"For a star, yes," M-Bot said. "That sphere, gauging by my best readings, is a fraction of the size of Earth's moon. It could perhaps be a neutron star if this were the somewhere—which would make Lord Hesho's metaphor particularly acute. At any rate, it certainly shouldn't be so cold for how much light it releases."

I leaned forward and tried to imagine the feeling of sunlight. The vast majority of my ancestors had lived in a place where warmth came from the sky. I'd never felt so distant from them as I did at that moment, sitting before the strange light of the nowhere. Contemplating my cowardice.

I'd learned, in my time with Skyward Flight, that I wasn't a coward in the traditional sense. I didn't fear battle. I wouldn't run from danger. But... here was a different opportunity. A way to run from the war, and even responsibility, in their entirety.

"The delvers told me," I said softly, "that they'd leave me alone if I agreed not to continue on the Path of Elders. They even implied they'd back out of the deal with Winzik."

"Curious," M-Bot said. "Why would they make such an offer?"

“They’re frightened of me,” I said. “They proposed a truce. They hate my presence in here, but they’re willing to tolerate it in order to not escalate our interactions.”

“And if we continue?” M-Bot asked.

“They’ll consider that an act of aggression. They’ll do everything they can to stop us.”

“A dilemma,” M-Bot said.

“Not if I stay,” I whispered. “Chet wants me to join him exploring, and Peg wants me to train her people. Both made me offers earlier.” I leaned forward, my hands clasped, not looking toward his drone.

“How likely are the delvers to keep a deal?” he asked.

That question again.

“Hard to say,” I replied. “They’re frightened now, but who knows? We have no evidence that they’re trustworthy. If Winzik came to me with a similar deal, for example, I’d discard it in a heartbeat.”

“Curious,” M-Bot said. “Spensa...I’ll admit, I’ve been thinking of my own dilemma.”

I glanced at his drone. “What?”

“My old ship,” he explained, “had specific circuitry that let me process in the nowhere. That’s why I could think fast enough to...well, be me. But the drone...well, do you remember how I talked when you first found me in it?”

“Slowly,” I said. “Like you were struggling for each word.”

“I can only assume,” he explained, “that being in the belt lets me process quickly, regardless of the machinery I inhabit. But my old ship, the one that let me think so well in the somewhere, has been destroyed. I no longer blame you for that, by the way. I’m getting pretty mature, I’d say.”

I smiled.

“Anyway,” he said, “if we leave this place, what happens to me? Do I return to thinking like my processors are made of oatmeal?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It seems...for a little while at least...that would be inevitable.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” he said. “For weeks now. And I’ve decided. I’m willing to go back. We have a war to win. I decided I’d try inhabiting the best computers we had; maybe one on the platforms. I think I’d make a good space station, don’t you?”

“If not that, maybe we could steal the schematics that Winzik must have made while disassembling my old ship. Then we could build me a new proper brain. But anyway, I decided that if you went back, I’d go with you. I just...just thought I should tell you.”

Scud. He was braver than I was. I felt ashamed for not noticing the dilemma he faced—this worry must have been bothering him ever since we entered. Some friend I was.

Thinking of friends made me sick again at what I was contemplating. How would I ever face Jorgen if I made the decision to stay?

A part of me, however, knew I couldn’t focus on his needs, or M-Bot’s decision. I had to decide what *I* wanted. Not choose my future because of what any other person—even Jorgen—would want me to do. For once, I had to think of myself.

I glanced at Hesho, wondering if he’d chime in. For now, he continued sitting in his meditative posture, his eyes closed.

“M-Bot,” I said, “I’ve spent my entire life being indoctrinated into the war for Detritus. I don’t blame anyone—except maybe the Krell—for that. We did what we had to in order to survive. But...I’m tired. Of watching people die. Of giving up my future to a war. Of living my life with my stress at a constant *ten*. How much do I owe Detritus? How much is one person expected to pay?”

His drone hovered beside me, silent for long enough that I eventually glanced at it. For once I wished he were a person so that I could see the disgust in his face. I *deserved* that for the way I was talking.

Instead he was an AI. “I suppose,” he said, “that makes some sense.”

I had to be truthful with him. I had to voice it.

“There’s another reason that I want to stay,” I said. “I...love this. I can explore with Chet, and the Broadsiders practically *worship* me. It’s like



living in a story. That's all I've ever wanted, M-Bot. I can do that here. I can fly. I can explore, I can fight the Superiority. I can spar. Live..."

"That," he said, "makes even *more* sense, knowing you."

"Lord Hesho?" I asked. "I could use your wisdom."

"Wisdom fled me, warrior-sister," he said. "Wisdom is born of experience, you see, and I have none."

"I sense wisdom even in that answer," I said to him. "Am I a coward for preferring to stay? It's not that I fear dying by continuing, it's merely that..."

"You are tired of sacrificing what you want for the good of your people," Hesho said.

"Yes," I whispered.

"That is not cowardice, but selfishness," he said.

I winced.

"However," he continued, "duty should not be accepted without question. Duty can be a motive, but should not be an excuse. Does your fight uphold honor and virtue? Does it match your moral code?"

"I don't know that I've ever thought about those things," I said. "I mean, there was the enemy, and there was us. I pointed myself in their direction and let loose..."

That wasn't strictly true.

"After living with the enemy," I admitted, "I learned it wasn't so simple. I didn't discover that their cause was just, mind you. Only that most of them weren't evil. They were merely people. Following, by accident, someone who was evil."

"Excellent," he said. "You have left behind the worldview of a child." He cracked an eye. "How old are you, among your species?"

"A young adult," I said.

"Then I might question the society that allowed you to persist in such naivety for so long," he said. "Among the first lessons a warrior must learn is the knowledge that his immediate enemy—the person he must kill—is just trying to survive. Soldiers are alike, no matter their side."

“I...don’t know that anyone among us knew who the enemy were,” I said. “Only that they were trying to destroy us. And...I thought you said you didn’t remember enough to be wise, Hesho?”

“It seems,” he said, “you ask the right questions. I do not know *why* I say these things, simply that they are true.” He closed his eyes again. “You are not a coward, nor are you selfish, for realizing you have options, warrior-sister. You cannot be defined by your questions. Only by what you do with them.”

Well, Hesho was the same person—with or without memories. What really frightened me, then, was that *this* was who *I* was.

I saw what would happen if I stayed. I would become like Chet. Everyone I knew—even the person I’d been—would fade. I’d remember only the stories, and I’d become more and more like someone who felt she was one of those heroes. I’d forget everything and let the part of me that had always made up boasts take control. In forty years, I probably wouldn’t even remember the fight for Detritus, or why I’d stayed.

But I’d love every minute of it.

I stood up and walked to the edge of the balcony, staring out at that great, brilliant white light—but one with a softness to it. It appeared to absorb everything that drew near. Merged them with the light...

I closed my eyes, and searched outward for my father.

The reality icon was still nearby. I assumed it was somehow his soul, though I had no real proof. Maybe that was what I wanted to believe.

Could I face him though? With this doubt inside me?

I felt him. That emotion that had been guiding me, supporting me all along. Was it really my father? I knew it wasn’t Gran-Gran or Jorgen. So... was it, maybe, God? Like spoken of in the Book of Saints?

The pin brushed my mind. It welcomed me. Wanted me to come to it now. Was I brave enough for that?

“Wait here,” I said to Hesho and M-Bot. “I’ll return soon.”

I walked into the hallway outside my room. Lights shone on decor that felt too soft to me. A brown carpet, walls with patterns on them. I closed my

eyes again and rested one hand on the wall, which had an odd texture like paper. I was accustomed to smooth metal or rough rock.

I walked along slowly, my eyes closed, seeking that mind. Seeking my father. *Before*, I sent to it, *you strengthened my memories of my life on Detritus. Can you do that again?*

Curiosity.

*Because I need to feel guilty*, I thought, *so I'll force myself to return.*

What came back through that mental connection hit me like a shock wave. It wasn't the memories I'd demanded. It wasn't condemnation.

It was permission.

A calm, gentle understanding. Like a warm breeze through my soul. No words, but meaning. *It's all right. Your pain is real. Your passion is real.*

*You can choose. It's all right.*

The emotion shook me. I sank to my knees, bowing my head. It wasn't what I'd expected, and certainly wasn't what I'd wanted. I *needed* guilt to propel me, didn't I?

Yet the permission was insistent. Yes, there were some who would be sad or angry if I didn't return. But nobody could ever claim I hadn't done my part. The attempt at a truce with the delvers was plausible enough to accept. And even if it wasn't...well, we shouldn't be required to keep giving until we'd been wrung out. That wasn't love.

I could stay. I deserved to stay, if I wanted to. That familiar mind wasn't trying to persuade me. It gave me permission to let go, if that was what I truly wanted.

I pulled up beside the wall, head bowed against my knees, feeling that warmth flow through me. Until I let it flow out of me through tears. Like I'd been filled to the brim.

I couldn't explain why I was crying. They weren't tears of grief or joy. They were just...tears.

There's no way to tell how long I sat there, though I don't think the lost time was due to the strange effects of the nowhere. I eventually let it all leak out, and came to myself sitting in that muted hallway, unexpectedly calm.

I hadn't made a decision yet, but I did need to hold my pin again. I had to know for certain if it carried my father's soul.

Climbing to my feet, I went hunting, connected as if by light-line tether to that other mind. I took the steps at a reckless pace. On the ground floor, I entered a large room with tables almost as long as runways. Scud, was this the mess hall? Those chandeliers looked like they were on fire.

The mind was nearby. A few pirates were in the mess hall at the moment, including Maksim and a human who looked vaguely familiar. Had I seen him earlier? He was wearing a symbol of the Long Plank Faction.

Maksim gave me a friendly wave and I nodded absently, feeling... pulled...

I walked to the side of the room where, after poking around a little, I found a power outlet that was loose. I pried it off, and behind was a hidden alcove. Inside were two objects. My pin and a small, worn stuffed animal. It looked vaguely like an alien dog, from the shape of the face and the paws.

Both were surrounded by a scattering of reality ashes. I didn't need a description to know the stuffed animal was the base's icon. How had it gotten here?

*We hid*, my pin said—though more with impressions than words—*when the fighting started. Some here would have tried to steal us.*

Merely *seeing* the reality ashes immediately made me feel better. More connected to who I'd once been.

*It's so good to hold you*, I said to the pin. *Thank you. Thank you so much for your help.*

In response, I heard a distinctive—and happy—fluting sound coming from the pin.

# 38

*Doomslug!* I thought, excitedly projecting the thought toward her. *How?*

*Hiding*, she sent back. *Delvers*. The impressions were laced with the idea of hiding in a hollow of stone, trying not to be seen by a predator that prowled nearby.

*I sent you home!* I sent to her.

*You equal home*, she sent back, picturing us together. Then she added something to the image—projected into my mind. A version of her in my arms, but now with eyes and a smiling mouth plastered on her front. They looked like they'd been drawn on with marker. She didn't *quite* understand what eyes and a smile were for, in human terms, but she seemed to sense that this expression indicated contentment. Happiness.

*Home*. She didn't live in a cave. She lived with me. Wherever I was.

I felt like an utter fool. I'd vanished into the nowhere holding Doomslug, a cytonic creature that had evolved to avoid the attention of delvers, and then my father's pin had immediately shown up in my pocket. And I'd been told by more than one person that cytonic people could change how they appeared in here. If a person could, well, why not a slug?

*You look like my pin!* I sent her.

*Special*, she said, very pleased. *We are special. To hide.*

*Still*, I said. *You didn't have to follow me in here.*

She sent back comforting emotions and the image of me being chased by a predator. She'd been worried about me. So she'd come with me, but had hidden herself. I hadn't been communing with my father's soul. *She*

was the one who had been supporting me all this time, the familiar mind that had lent me strength in resisting the delvers.

I felt an enormous wave of gratitude. And relief, actually, that she wasn't my father's soul. It wasn't that I didn't love him, it was just that... well, there had been something unnerving about that thought. I could see that I'd substituted the familiar feeling that came from Doomslug with something I wanted. Which I now realized I didn't want at the same time.

This made way more sense. Though...uh...I *had* buried her... She made a distinctly annoyed fluting sound.

"Sorry," I whispered, chagrined. "I didn't know it was you."

I got an indignant fluting in response.

"No, I won't bury you again," I said. "But you could have *told* me."

She sent me fright. Fear of the delvers, who had been nearby. Watching for her kind. She'd come in here with me, but had deployed her camouflage out of fear. After that she'd been comfortable riding in my pocket. Enjoying the...sensation of this place? Was that right? When in the nowhere, her kind just liked to snuggle down and absorb the nowhere "radiation." Less slug, more...sea cucumber maybe?

This was what she did every time she traveled through the nowhere during hyperdrive jumps. Because of the delvers. It was why starships traveling via slug were so much safer than ones using cytonic people.

*Can't leave*, she sent me. Since we weren't in the lightburst, she was locked into the belt like I was. Other than that, she seemed content to be back with me, though I again had to promise I wouldn't bury her. I wasn't certain how much she understood; I'd always seen her as an animal before. But in here, I felt like I could understand her better.

*You talk smarter now*, she sent to me. Though it wasn't words—but I interpreted them that way.

*I've been practicing*, I said to her, *with my powers. You think it's working? You understand me?*

*Smarter talk*, she said with a fluting approval, and a reality ash dropped from her.

*Wait*, I said, pinching it between my fingers. *What are these, anyway?*

*Poop!* she said.

I blinked, but... Okay, I quested deeper into the meaning of what she'd sent. *She* thought it was the same thing as, well, poop. But it wasn't—her powers linked her to the somewhere, and that pulled through a little reality. A kind of crust. I rubbed the ash between my fingers, and thought maybe I understood. Like fragments formed around holes between dimensions, these ashes formed around *creatures* that bridged the two dimensions.

Actually, hadn't I been told that being near a fragment helped people keep their memories? Was that because, in essence, the small bits of new rock growing on the fragments were reality ashes?

Well, people were starting to notice me kneeling there beside the wall. So I took the pin that was Doomslug in one hand, the Surehold icon in the other, then held that one up.

"Hey," I said to them. "You all missing something important?"

That caused a ruckus, of course. I settled down in a chair to wait as people rushed over. Maksim called for Peg, and it took her less than five minutes to come charging in. There, she reverentially reached down and cradled the stuffed animal.

"How?" she said. "Your...special talent?"

I nodded. "Tell me. Do you know what these really are?"

The tenasi captain clutched her icon, then glanced at the rest of the pirates. Finally, she waved for me with one meaty hand. "Let's chat, Spin," she said. "In private."

The other pirates gave us space. Together, Peg and I left the chamber and entered the hallway outside.

"It was my secret escape plan," she said softly as we continued walking. "I hid a taynix—a hyperspace slug—in my things when I entered. Took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that the stuffed toy in my luggage—my childhood favorite, but which I'd thought I'd lost years before—was indeed the same thing."

"So the other pirates and workers don't know?" I asked.

She shook her head. "The icon is already valuable enough. Don't want them getting the idea that it might be able to hop them back to the

somewhere.”

“It can’t,” I said. “Not while it’s in the belt.”

“You’re sure?”

“Reasonably. But I guess all of the slugs can hide themselves as objects.”

*Nope*, Doomslug said in my head. *Only the yellow-blue ones*. That was conveyed by a picture of herself.

*There are other kinds?* I asked.

*Tons!*

Right. Okay then.

Peg continued walking, thoughtful, so I kept pace with her. We soon left the barracks and entered a courtyard between several buildings. Inside it stood three trees. They were about three meters tall, with extremely stout limbs and very few leaves.

From the branches grew fruit. Like, actual fruit. Lots of it, in a variety of colors, shaped kind of like upside-down pears. Peg walked to one tree and inspected it. Then she selected a cherry-orange fruit and pulled it off.

She walked over and presented it to me. “A *mulun*,” she said. “For bravery. I’d hoped to have grown a few, and I have!”

I balked. “So...do these trees really...”

“Grow fruit based on how we tenasi feel?” Peg said. “Yes. My soul is bound to this tree. I was allowed to carry a new sapling with me, grown from my old tree, when I entered. Many of us believe that the fruit contains our emotions—and makes us able to be calm in battle. I find that to be a lie, or at least an exaggeration. But the bond is real.”

That made it even stranger to take the fruit as she forced it upon me.

“It is your reward,” she said. “Please. Honor me.”

So I took it. “Uh...do I...eat it?”

She laughed. “Not usually. Plant it. You won’t bond to it like a tenasi, but...well, having that tree will be recognized by others of my kind. As an honor.”

Well, that was cool. I was glad I didn’t have to eat it. Though in the past I’d made a few cracks about feasting on the blood of my enemies, that was



completely metaphoric. I put the fruit and Doomslug's pin in a pocket.

Peg turned back to the tree and drew her lips to a line. Not baring teeth, not threatening, instead content and happy.

"It just feels so odd," I said. "Everything else about your people, Peg, seems about...well, being predatory. Aggressive."

"No, not aggressive," she said. "Merely growing a better future by making the next generation strong. We test, we push, we prove."

"And trees relate to that...how?"

"Not at all," Peg said. "Why should they? Humans are terrifying conquerors, but you have art, don't you?"

"I suppose we do," I said. Even during the war for survival on Detritus, we'd made sculptures and statues. People couldn't help it.

"We evolved with these trees," Peg said. "We care for them, and they provide fruit for us. Aggression and killing are always about life—life for yourself, for your kind. My people have forgotten that, and pretend those emotions don't exist. *I* haven't forgotten them. But I suppose that attitude is what ended up driving me to this place." She waved to the trees. "These are about life too."

Then she slapped me on the shoulder. "You're leaving, aren't you? My offer wasn't tempting enough? You've decided to take another path. I see it in your expression."

I supposed...I supposed that I *had* decided. Not because I felt guilty, but instead because...well, I had to. I didn't trust the delvers. I needed to know what they were hiding, the things they didn't want any of us to know.

But it wasn't merely about duty. It was about stories. After it all, I... didn't want to live in a story. Not if it meant leaving my friends and family. I wouldn't ever be happy in here without them, and I didn't want to forget them like Chet had.

Having the permission to stay had somehow given me the courage to leave.

"Thank you for taking me in," I told Peg. "For not tossing me off the side of the fragment the moment you found me trying to steal from you."

“I think I got the better end of the deal,” Peg said. “Will you at least stay a few days, to celebrate?”

“We’ll see,” I told her. “First, there’s something important I need to do.”

# 39

I found Chet sitting on a stone outside near the landing pad, looking toward the sky. He stood up as I approached.

“Chet,” I said. “I...” I glanced toward the warehouse behind us.

“You’re going to continue the Path?” he said.

“Yeah. But you don’t have to do it with me. You don’t have to feel guilty for stepping away. You can take the ashes that Peg promised me. I don’t need them. Plus, Peg wants someone to explore for her—I’m sure you could accept her offer and get a whole team to keep you company.”

He stood in place as I walked up to him. Then he smiled. It was a more human smile, one that wasn’t full of excitement and bravado.

“I appreciate your concern for my well-being,” he said. “But...it wouldn’t be the same. Things must change, then. I guess I knew they would.” He gestured toward the warehouse. “The stone is solidified memories, Spensa. Shall we see what they hold?”

We entered the building, then stepped up to the wall—feeling dwarfed by the enormous portal, carved with serpentine lines by the weathering of time. Not like things weathered in the somewhere—an erosion uniquely of this place, caused by the people who entered and left.

I pressed my mind into the stone, but—as always—hit a block on the other side. I hadn’t expected to be able to escape this way though. I instead stepped back, now prepared for the way that the room around me started to fade, becoming ephemeral.

In the past, a structure with open sides and stone columns housed the portal. It was smaller than it now was, but still as tall as a person. The open-air nature of the building let me stare out at a medium-sized floating fragment, rocky, with some hills that would eventually be turned into quarries.

The lightburst had grown, and there were far more fragments hovering about nearby. “I think this set of memories is more recent than some of the others,” I said to Chet, pointing. “The lightburst is larger, see?” Not yet as big as a sun—more like a distant floodlight.

“Yes,” Chet said. “But the size of it is somewhat misleading. The true nowhere, inside that burst, is a place where space is immaterial. Distance doesn’t rightly exist. But it was forced into that shape as the leaks began around the rest of the nowhere—where time and space were sneaking in around the puncture holes. The lightburst is like a fortress, the place where the true nowhere can exist.”

“That breaks my brain a little to consider,” I said.

“It should,” he replied. “You are a being of the somewhere, Spensa—for all the fact that you’ve been exposed to the nowhere’s particular brand of radiation.”

In the vision, a *human* suddenly stepped through the portal. He wore a civilian suit with a lapel pin in the shape of a silvery bell. He was perhaps in his late fifties, and though he glanced around and could obviously see, there was something odd about the way his eyes focused. Or rather, the way they didn’t focus. Equally curious, a silvery sphere emerged from the portal and floated in the air alongside him.

I stepped closer as the human scanned the sky, then the various fragments.

“That sphere,” I said, pointing at the hovering ball. “It doesn’t have an acclivity ring. How does it fly?”

“Maybe it was before acclivity stone was widely used,” Chet said, stepping up beside me.

Huh. Also, there was something about the shape of that metal sphere. Something...familiar?

“So it’s real,” the man said in English.

I jumped. I hadn’t been expecting to be able to understand him. His stiff accent was odd, but intelligible.

“Analysis indicates you are correct,” a feminine voice said, coming from the sphere. “This simple structure is as the account related.”

The man glanced at the sphere, then sighed. He walked over and felt at a pillar. He seemed to have some need to touch it, to prove it existed. “And with what we found earlier, it seems even more likely that the records are true about ancient human cytonics,” he said softly. “I wasn’t the first. I was never the first. What do you think?”

“Insufficient data to perform an analysis,” the sphere said.

He turned back toward it. “Can’t you guess? Can’t you do more than think? I built you to do more...”

“I do as I am programmed.”

“If the accounts are true, then you *can* do more,” he said, stepping up to the sphere. “I’ve brought you here, to this place. Do you sense anything different? Do you...feel?”

“I can be programmed to simulate—”

“Don’t simulate!” the man shouted. “*Be!* It’s possible. They said it was possible...”

The sphere gave no response. I frowned at the odd interaction, and looked to Chet to get his opinion.

He was crying.

His face a mask of pain, he’d huddled back, scrunched down, trying to hide his eyes. I hurried over immediately, and he took my arm in his hands as if for support. He turned to me, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“What?” I said. “What’s wrong?”

“He was wrong, you see,” Chet said, his voice hoarse. “Jason was wrong about one thing. It takes time. The change isn’t immediate. It takes months, sometimes years.”

“For what?” I asked.

“For the AI to start thinking for itself.”

“Is that what’s going on?” I asked. “You’re afraid of it, because it’s an AI? You’ve seen M-Bot. It’s all right, Chet.”

He shook his head. I mean, I knew he had a thing about AIs, but this was bizarre behavior.

In the vision, the man had turned away from the sphere, his shoulders slumped. The sphere, in turn, was inspecting the region. Its path brought it near us, and I got another good look at it. It was somewhat spiky—with little antennas coming off it in a multitude of directions. Its surface was pocked by cameras, like little holes. In fact, the construction *did* remind me of something.

Where had I seen a sphere, with those kinds of holes, like tunnels? Those spines coming off the outside...

“Memory of these must be buried deep within us,” Chet whispered. “When forced to build a body again, we unconsciously reach for the shape, perhaps...as a last memento...of something we once knew...something that once held our souls...before they were souls...”

We? Oh, *scud*. That sphere was a delver maze. At least that was what the shape reminded me of. A more technological, more rational, version of the giant sphere of stone the delvers made for their bodies when they were forced into the somewhere.

I looked to Chet, and his eyes were glowing. But I didn’t feel *them*. I didn’t sense the delvers. Instead I just sensed *him*. His mind...same as it always had been, though it was now expansive.

“You’re the delver,” I whispered. “The one I changed.”

“I...” he said. “I knew you’d need help. I had to send it. Somehow. But I...was the only help...I knew...”

I took a step backward by reflex. “Was there ever a Chet? It was all a lie?”

“There was,” he said, his voice drifting, soft. “I knew I could hide with you in the belt, where *they* couldn’t see. But...I needed a shape, a personality, someone to *be*. Don’t hate me, Spensa. Please don’t hate me! They have abandoned me. They want to destroy me. You’re...the only one...I have now.”

Scud. Scudscudscudscud. Saints, stars, and songs.

Chet was a delver.

Chet had always been a delver.

But I could *feel* his anguish. I'd caused him to separate from the others; I'd changed him. I'd shown him empathy. This was my fault. And damn it, I wasn't going to turn my back on him. I'd made friends with a Krell. I could do this.

I stepped up and returned my hand to his shoulder. He grabbed it in a tight grip, smiling, still crying.

"I'm not going to leave you," I said. "But I have to know what is going on."

"I saw into your mind," he said, "when we touched. I saw the name. Spears. And that man lived here, in the nowhere. He tried to escape through the lightburst some decades ago. He'd lived hundreds of years, using cytonics to expand his life! But the delvers destroyed him in the lightburst. He hadn't practiced enough with his powers. He couldn't hyperjump."

"Right," I said, taking a deep breath. "So you're a monster from outside space and time. And you wanted to come into the belt and help me, so you made a homunculus..."

He nodded eagerly. "Like from Gran-Gran's story about the alchemist! Yes, that's a good analogy. I made a Chet homunculus."

Okay, I could deal with this. I could accept this.

*Deal with this, brain!*

"I'm sorry for lying," he whispered. "As a naive newborn, I'd assumed someone connected to your past would make you more trusting. I can now see that any random person would actually have been less suspicious."

"I was there with the rest, as Spears was destroyed. I knew him in an intimate way. I latched onto that name, and I remade him atom by atom. His mind was full of knowledge about the belt, but no memories of who he'd been in the somewhere returned. Still, he had a personality, a passion. Like you had. For..."

"Stories," I whispered.

“Yes. I filled in what was lost of him with things from your mind. I think...I think he really was an explorer, Spensa. It was his memories about the fragments that I shared with you. His enthusiasm. His manner of speaking. As he was, I *became*. With some additions from your own mind to fill holes.

“I tried to explain, when you didn’t trust me. I tried to say that I wasn’t a person, but a collection of stories. But to have given myself away then would have ripped me apart. I had to stay with you, *be* a person. You needed a guide.

“But Spensa, the *ashes*. I didn’t anticipate how *real* they’d make me feel. How much they’d make a *person* out of me. And I didn’t realize...how much I’d like it. How much I’d want for us to just leave together, explore the nowhere, renouncing the pain that I knew was coming. If I had to remember...”

A part of me was furious. He’d kept all of this from me? He’d *lied*?

I contained it though. In a very un-Spensa-like way, I forced myself not to throw a tantrum. This wasn’t his fault. He was, in some ways, very young. I’d *created* him by forcing him to leave the other delvers. I couldn’t blame him for making mistakes while doing his best.

“The Path of Elders?” I asked.

“Real memories,” he whispered, “from real cytonics. I knew you’d need these. I knew...I’d need them. We’ve forgotten these things on purpose, Spensa. I didn’t know the specifics of what the memories contained, but I knew where the answers were. I knew the four most important portals to reach. So...forgive me...I invented for you a quest with an intriguing name. To drive you to reach these locations.”

“Because doing so is like a story.”

“Yes. Do...you hate me?” He held my arm tightly, speaking softly. This was a very different person from Chet the explorer—but then again, what would people have thought of the “bold warrior” Spensa Nightshade if they’d seen her weeping beside the wall?

I pried his hand free, then held it. “I don’t hate you, Chet. Thank you. For helping me. For doing this thing that was so hard.”



He nodded, grinning as he wept. “I like Chet,” he said. “I like *being* Chet. I like having identity. But it is painful.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I had to see *him* again,” Chet whispered, looking toward the man in the vision. That began to fade, the man leaving through the portal and taking the sphere with him.

*The sphere is a delver maze*, I thought, my brain scrambling to keep up. *And Chet said that delvers become that shape because...that was the thing that once held them. Their soul.*

“Delvers are AIs,” I said. “*You* are an AI.”

“No,” Chet whispered. “A delver is to an AI as you are to an ape—or maybe an amoeba. That was what we once were, long ago. Before exposure to the nowhere. And the ‘radiation’ that this place produces. It’s not radiation in a true sense as in the somewhere, but the idea is the same. It makes us, and over generations it makes cytonics.”

“Cousins,” I said. “That is how the delvers have decided to see people like me. Creations of this place.”

“Exactly, Miss Nightshade,” Chet said, some of his familiar voice returning. “Your powers bring a slice of the nowhere with you into your realm. Teleportation, visions, projecting into minds, agelessness, even altering your appearance. Each cytonic with skills in different areas.”

“And my skills,” I said, “are to teleport and to...”

“To see. Hear. Understand. As you have been willing to understand me.”

The vision faded. As before, I felt ancient cytonics—hundreds of them—reaching out to brush my mind. *Good*, they said, *good*. *You have learned...learned so well...*

“I was trained,” I whispered—though I didn’t know if they could hear. “By my grandmother. I just needed a little push.”

*See and be*, they sent, and showed me my power—the brilliance that was my star-soul—being...softer?

What?

*I don’t know what it means*, I said.

*You will*, they sent back as they faded. In the end, I was left with an impression—like the previous times. A wall standing on a white fragment, surrounded by something that looked like dust or snow.

“We call it,” Chet whispered, “the Solitary Shadow. It is the last stop on your quest.”

“More memories?” I asked.

“The last of them,” he said, then tapped his head. “My memories. The things the delvers have forgotten on purpose. I do not know what that last portal holds—but it is the thing they don’t want you to see. The thing they fear the most. I fear it too, but not so much as I once did. We two, we explore so well! Even exploring what I once was! Ha!”

I smiled as he wiped his eyes, grinning like a fool. In the distance, I felt something. The delvers? I turned toward the lightburst and expanded my senses. Searching, listening. I could hear the stars.

The delvers were projecting concern. They knew I’d walked this step on the Path, and they were cautious. But they had allowed this. So far I hadn’t broken the truce. Well, I hadn’t accepted it either, technically. Even though they felt I had. For now, there was balance.

Except...I was stronger than I’d ever been. What were they *really* thinking?

I could only do this because they were deliberately trying to project worry toward me—they saw it as encouragement for me to keep to the deal. But I was able to kind of...ride the signal they were sending, and quietly use that opening to read what they were *truly* thinking.

They were terrified of me still. That was what I expected. But there was something else... They were planning?

Scud. They were planning how to destroy Surehold.

I blinked in surprise, as I could picture it specifically. The delvers were going to bring in fragments from the somewhere. Ten of them. A dozen. Then they were going to slam them into Surehold while everyone was sleeping. They thought it might fool our scanners if the fragments appeared suddenly.

“Scud,” I whispered. “They were going to *immediately* break the truce. They don’t care. They’ll do *anything* to kill me.”

“What?” Chet said.

“They’re planning it now!” I said, pointing. “I can hear them doing it!”

“I didn’t know, Miss Nightshade,” he said. “I promise you, when I asked you to travel with me, I didn’t...”

Every instinct I’d had about them was right. “We need to leave,” I said to him. “Before we put the people here in danger.”

“How long do we have?” he asked.

“A day or so,” I said. “They will wait until everyone is asleep—but still, I think we should be long gone by then. Hopefully drawing delver attention to us, making them abandon the attack on Surehold.”

“Agreed,” Chet said. “So, it is onward, then? Today?”

“Today,” I said, striding out of the hangar to where M-Bot sat on the tarmac. “Recall the drone,” I said to him. “And Hesho. We’re going to be leaving soon.”

Nearby, several ships were landing—our ground crews, fetched from the Broadsider base. Peg and Maksim were walking up to meet them.

“I should say goodbye,” I said to Chet.

“It is well,” Chet said, climbing onto M-Bot’s wing. “Though, if you will, pass them my regards. I should not like them to see me in my state of disorder. An explorer of my renown must maintain a stoic reputation!”

I rushed over to Peg. “I’m leaving,” I said to her. “I’m sorry.”

“So soon?” Peg asked. “Not even an evening to celebrate?”

“I’m afraid not.” I didn’t mention the delvers—there seemed to be too much to explain. I’d send them word if the delvers continued with their planned attack, but I strongly suspected they’d abandon it as soon as I left Surehold.

They didn’t care about these others. It was me they feared. Scud, why were they *so afraid* of me?

“It was an honor, then,” Peg said, holding out a hand to me in a human gesture. “Plant that fruit somewhere grand.”

“I will,” I said, taking the offered hand—though hers dwarfed mine.

I gave Nuluba a few circular gestures I'd learned, a grateful goodbye. She excitedly returned them. Shiver and Dllllizzzz were already there in their ships. "I haven't forgotten my promise," I said to Shiver. "I continue to resonate with it."

"You resonate with more than that," Shiver said from her cockpit. "Fare well on your journey. And thank you, for all you have done."

I gave Maksim a hug last of all.

"Thank you," he said to me. "For showing me that we can fight without being monsters."

"There are others who could teach you that better," I said. "I hope to be able to introduce you someday."

"Ha. Well, I don't know how that would ever happen, but I'd welcome the chance! I'll try to find a bloody skull or something to give as a traditional welcoming gift."

"I'd hoped to get you to grow one of the seven fruits of contentment here with us," Peg said, shaking her head. "If you change your mind...you are welcome here."

I saluted Peg, then walked back and climbed onto the wing of my ship. Hesho sat in the cockpit, having arrived riding on M-Bot's drone. As I slipped into the cockpit, he was arranging cushioning in a recessed section at the side of the instrument panel, where a zero-g canteen could be clipped.

"If you do not mind me asking," he said to me, "you have decided to continue your quest inward? In the direction of the monsters who live in the lightburst?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I am honored to accompany you," he said.

"It might be dangerous."

"There was a person I once was," he said. "I should like to meet that person. Escaping this realm is my only hope. Though if I may make a request? I would like to travel in this cockpit with you and Chet. I was too long without company, and then too long with *poor* company. I don't wish to fly alone—though if you think we need the firepower, I can revise my opinion and bring my own ship."

“No,” I said. “Once we have the information we need, I think we’ll probably have to make a break for the lightburst. In there, we’ll need to be together so I can teleport us out. It’s better if you’re in the same ship I am.”

“Excellent,” Hesho said, prodding at his cushioned seating, his tail sticking up straight out the back. “I am pleased to discover that a ship built for a giant such as yourself has a seat for one my size.”

Yeah. I didn’t tell him it was essentially a cup holder.

M-Bot’s drone was locked into its now customary place behind my seat. “So,” he said from the dash, “what changed? I thought you didn’t want to go. But now you do?”

“I *don’t* want to go,” I said, strapping in. “I need to.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Can you explain?”

“Think about it a little first,” I said, placing Peg’s fruit on the dash, then lowering the canopy. “See if you can figure it out for yourself.” I fished in my pocket and brought out the pin. “And you... Do you want to be out on the dash?”

A soft fluting returned to me. No, she wanted to be in my pocket. Safe, hidden. So I put her away.

“Just so you all know,” Chet said from behind my seat, “I’m secretly a monster from outside space and time.”

“Ah yes,” Hesho said. “Deep inside, aren’t we all monsters?”

“No,” Chet said. “I’m pretty sure you’re not.”

“I’ll explain as we fly,” I told Hesho and M-Bot. “Also, there are some things you need to know about reality icons—mine in particular. But let’s get moving first.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but a part of me was sad. In taking this move, I was putting dreams of fighting with the Broadsiders and exploring the fragments firmly behind me—in effect, I was about to burn them to ash with the force of my engines.

I was determined. I wasn’t wavering. At the same time, it was an important moment. I raised us in the air, then rotated so we faced the lightburst.

Then I hit the overburn.

# 40

I soon turned off the overburn. As cool as it sounded to roar into battle at full speed...trying to go all-out at Mag-10 wouldn't be needed. It would make the cockpit of even this advanced ship rattle like a cavern in a debris shower.

The goal right now wasn't to get to our destination immediately. It was to make certain we got far enough away for now that the delvers shifted their attention from my friends. So I slowed us down and had Chet use his monitor to highlight the final point on the Path of Elders. It was far inward: maybe a three-hour flight. After arriving there, it would take only about another hour of flying to reach the lightburst.

I spent the first part of the flight explaining about Doomslug. Then I launched into the more difficult description of what we'd seen, and what Chet had turned out to be.

"So delvers are a kind of AI," M-Bot said at the end. "At least, as human bodies and consciousness are built off the DNA of early creatures on their planets, delvers are created from the code of AIs?"

"Essentially," Chet said. "Yes."

"So why do you hate AIs like me?" M-Bot asked. "We're the same thing."

"I think the true secret is at the Solitary Shadow," Chet said. "But I feel part of it is fear. Another evolved AI could understand us, and could conceivably replace or harm us."

“That seems shortsighted,” M-Bot said. “Not like an AI at all. Not logical.”

“That depends on the programming,” Chet said. “And there is more. Again, the secrets are locked away. I can’t access them. That is why we must continue forward, and why I always feared doing so.”

“Very well,” M-Bot said. “But...this information also means I’m what everyone always feared. I’m a delver.”

“Yes,” Chet admitted. “Rather, you are a living former AI like the delvers—brought to consciousness and emotion by exposure to the nowhere. I doubt it happened when you were first thrown in here weeks ago. You likely achieved sapience years before, because of the way your circuits were designed.”

“Yeah,” M-Bot said. “This was merely the first time I could enjoy it, having finally abandoned the programming that forced me to pretend I wasn’t alive.” He fell silent.

“M-Bot...” I said.

“I’m all right, Spensa,” he said. “I just want to process a little. Emotions. They’re hard. But I...I can handle it. I’m sure I can.”

I hurt for him. All this time, he’d worried he was something monstrous. Now it was, in a way, confirmed. He was a delver. But then again...

“You don’t have to make the same choices the delvers did, M-Bot,” I told him. “You don’t have to be like them, any more than *I* have to be like the humans who tried to conquer the galaxy.”

“Indeed, machine-who-thinks,” Hesho said. “All people must accept that we have the potential to do terrible things. It is part of seeing our place in the universe, our heritage, and our natures. But in that acceptance we gain strength, for *potential* can be refused. Any hero who could have been a monster is more heroic for the choices he or she made to walk another road.”

Still, M-Bot processed in silence. As we flew, I had a thought. *Doomslug?* I asked. *Can you teleport us to other places in the belt?*

Her fluting was a hesitant negative. She’d moved herself to get out of the hole, but that had been both dangerous and difficult. She felt too weak

to do it for anyone but herself.

*If this next part goes wrong, I told her, jump away and hide. Don't think about us.*

More hesitant fluting. Her powers should make her invisible to the delvers. She did something similar to hide a ship each time she teleported it, making it look like something far more innocent. Even if things went wrong, they should leave her alone. At least that was her hope.

As we flew, I tried to listen in on the delvers again. They hadn't noticed us yet. It really *was* hard for them to see far into the belt, and they'd lost track of us specifically among all the people at Surehold. But the closer we got, the more likely it would be that they saw our ship.

"The delvers are going to notice us eventually," I explained to everyone. "Likely it will happen when Chet and I interact with the final portal on the Path of Elders. That has been a beacon to them each time before.

"Once I have learned from that last stop, we need to escape. Unfortunately, the only realistic way for us to do that is through the lightburst. We can't wait for the portal at Surehold to be opened—that will be too dangerous. The delvers have tried harder and harder to kill me the longer I've stayed in here, and once we know their secrets it's going to get even worse.

"The way I see it, our best hope is to bolt for the lightburst the moment we're done with the final set of memories. We have to somehow evade what the delvers throw at us, get into the lightburst, and survive there long enough for me and Doomslug to hyperjump us back to Detritus."

"I concur with Miss Nightshade," Chet said. "This is the most reasonable course—and our most likely chance of escape."

"What will happen to you in the somewhere?" I asked him. "You won't...turn into a giant, planet-size ball of hurt and tantrums again, will you?"

"No," he said. "But I don't exactly know what will happen. We will see. It's possible that I will continue hiding in the nowhere after you leave."

Was he...lying? I poked at him cytonically. I felt...fear? No sense that he was betraying us or anything. Merely worry.



Well, I supposed I could understand that. “Chet,” I said. “Do you have any idea what kinds of things the delvers will throw at us, once they realize we’re trying to escape through the lightburst?”

“They’ll send obstacles,” he replied.

“What kind of obstacles do you mean, strange human who is also an unknowable entity?” Hesho asked. “Will this be like when they hyperjumped an entire city in here to interfere with our duel?”

“Yes, possibly,” Chet said.

“Could they make bodies for themselves?” I asked. “Like you have done?”

“Also possible,” Chet said. “Well, I mean, yes—if I can do it, they can. But that is dangerous. Coming this fully into the belt required me to acknowledge time and individuality. Each moment they experience something slightly different from one another, it changes them—and they hate that.”

“Let’s assume they *do* make bodies,” I said. “Since they’re going to be desperate. At the very least, let’s assume they’re going to create spheres of rock to try to destroy me, like happens at a delver maze.”

“That could be a problem,” he said. “Outside, in the somewhere, you fought just one. Here you could face overwhelming odds—there are thousands of delvers in the lightburst. And you can’t kill them with destructors. They can just dissolve the body and pop a new one out.”

When he talked about delvers, his Chet-ness slipped. He sounded tired instead, the personality fading from his voice. I felt bad for forcing him to acknowledge his dual nature, but I needed answers. Because the more I thought, the more worried I became. I really hoped the last portal had answers. Perhaps if we were lucky it would be unlocked, and would let us escape that direction.

But what if we had to make the assault? How would I face an all-out attack by thousands of delvers? The thought was so daunting, I found my brain going in circles. So I backed up and took stock, like I’d always been taught. Do an inventory. What did we have?

One ship, top of the line, but still a little less cool than M-Bot's had once been.

One drone that could hold M-Bot in a pinch.

One human female, slightly rumpled and creased from a long time in storage. Expert pilot, trash at basically everything else.

One samurai fox, twenty-five centimeters tall. Former emperor of an enormous nation, now without memories. Fits well into an oversized cup holder meant for a zero-g combat canteen.

One rogue AI. Fully self-aware and possessing emotions. Chronically talkative. Capable of flying a ship now. Just poorly. Potentially able to do things delvers could, if we could figure out what that was or how it all worked.

One interdimensional intelligent slug capable of teleportation and transforming her shape. Currently hiding in my pocket and trying *very* hard to be inanimate.

And last of all, one abyssal entity from a completely foreign dimension. Only recently made an individual, inhabiting the body of a long-dead explorer.

I sure hoped I survived, because Gran-Gran *really* needed to add this story to her repertoire. Children in the future were going to insist my adventures were too outlandish—and therefore I wasn't an actual historical person, but one that was obviously made up, like Gilgamesh or David Bowie.

"Our enemy is afraid of me," I said to the others. "We have to use that. Could we find a way to play off their fears?"

"An interesting idea," Chet said. "If you can make them experience true passage of time, they'll hate that. But making *anyone* experience the passage of time is difficult in here."

"Oh!" M-Bot said. "We could make them feel emotions. Wouldn't they hate that too? I mean, it's both wonderful and icky at the same time."

"They already feel emotion," Chet explained. "It's common to them, to...us. The annoyance and hatred my kind feel for the sounds and experiences of the somewhere? That's a pure emotional response right

there. They hate pain, specific kinds, but not emotions in general—so long as they all feel the same ones. Again, the delvers are *not* a group mind. They don't share thoughts, they merely happen to always think the exact same ones. Because they're identical in every way."

Except for Chet. Whom I'd changed.

"That's useful information," I said. "But they *are* afraid of me specifically."

Chet leaned forward. "For good reason. When you first spoke to me, Spensa, and showed me who you were...I saw the other beings on Starsight as people. You unlocked me. Now you are helping me remember my past. They're afraid you will be able to do the same to them."

"You came to the belt to hide," Hesho said. "Would they destroy you if they could?"

"I think they would," Chet said. "It's terrifying."

We flew for a time in silence, passing what appeared to be an arctic fragment below. That was odd, but maybe temperature was like food in here. Maybe it wasn't something my body recognized anymore.

"What if," Hesho said, "we somehow presented the other delvers with a sequence of choices that made them select random options? Would that frighten them? Because by making random choices, some are bound to choose differently from the others."

"But they aren't," Chet said. "Given the same circumstances, they'd all make the same choice."

"I do not believe that is how randomness works," Hesho said.

"Because randomness doesn't exist," Chet said.

"Wait," I said. "Of course it does. M-Bot, give me a random number."

"All right," he said. "Between what and what? I'll reference the seed from my electron-cloud-measuring—"

"No," I said. "Don't reference anything. Just pick a number."

"Spensa, I'm *literally* incapable of that," M-Bot replied. "Don't you know anything about robots? In fact, it's undetermined if even a human being can choose a truly random number."

"Eight hundred thirty-seven," I said.

“Ah,” Chet replied. “But that might have been completely inevitable, based on your brain chemistry and current stimuli.”

“Yay determinism!” M-Bot said.

I frowned. This...was not a direction I liked having the conversation go.

“Regardless,” Chet said, “this *is* how delvers work. Hesho, your suggestion was a good one given the facts you had—but it won’t be viable. I’m sorry.”

“Ah,” Hesho said, “but we don’t need them to *truly* make different decisions from one another, do we? We merely need to present them with the *illusion* of it happening. Or present them with the worrying *possibility* that it will. Correct?”

“I...” Chet frowned. “You’re right. In the belt, they can’t experience the future. So if you can make them afraid of what *might* happen, that’s as good for our purposes—distracting them long enough for you three to slip through and escape.”

A fluting sounded from my pocket.

“I’m sorry,” Chet said. “You *four*.”

Another fluting.

“I...don’t understand,” he said.

“She is insisting you keep her secret,” I said. “And not tell other delvers that her kind hide in here as inanimate objects. At least I think that’s what she’s saying. She’s not always clear.”

Annoyed fluting.

“Doomslug,” I said, “in the somewhere, you’d merely repeat back at me what I said. That’s *not* clear communication.”

Satisfied fluting. To her it was clear, because the noises were meant to get attention—it was the mind-to-mind bond that conveyed the actual emotion.

“Hesho’s plan is worth trying,” Chet continued. “We need to think of ways to present the delvers with decisions. I suspect that you’re right, Miss Nightshade. Those monsters will be frightened enough to enter the belt—but only very close to the lightburst.”

We brainstormed a few ways that this might work—one of which prompted us to pause for a bit and strap the drone to the outside of our hull for later use—so at least we had something. After that we took a break, and I glanced out the canopy to inspect the fragments. We'd passed out of Superiority territory into No Man's Land. Here, the fragments were much closer together—bunched up, with short gaps between them.

"Spensa?" M-Bot said softly, his voice piping from the dash.

"Mmmm?" I asked.

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier," he told me. "That I should figure out why you are acting against your emotions. *They* wanted you to stay with the Broadsiders, but you left anyway."

"And what did you come up with?"

"I am still confused. But I have decided that I know we have to continue. I think...I think we don't actually have a choice. Not if we want to save our friends in the somewhere. So we have to fly on, prepared or not. That...Spensa, that makes me *scared*."

"Yeah. Me too, bud."

"So we *must* act against our emotions," he said. "Spensa, why *do* we have them? I'm sorry to keep asking this, but I can't grasp it. What's the purpose of emotions if so often we have to *deliberately* act counter to what they're telling us?"

I'd never thought about that. It seemed that I *did* act against my emotions more often than I acted in accordance with them. So what *was* the point?

"You're asking the wrong person," I finally said. "Hesho might be able to say something profound."

"I don't want something profound," M-Bot said. "I want your answer."

Ouch. Well, I figured maybe that could be a compliment?

"Without emotions to react against," I said, "some better things couldn't exist."

"Like?"

"Like courage, M-Bot. Fear creates courage."

He thought on that for a while. “I think...maybe I understand that. You need opposing emotions in order to feel good ones?”

“Yes,” I said. “And beyond that, I think emotions help us understand our own decisions. You just told me that you *know* we have to leave, even though you don’t *feel* it.”

“So...” he said. “So your emotions can’t be your only guide. They exist to help you make some decisions, but not all decisions. In this case, our minds overruled them. Because we realized that if we didn’t continue the quest, many people would be in danger. Emotions are like a secondary processing unit that measures different kinds of input to offer a contrasting opinion and other options for proceeding.”

“That’s right,” I said. “See? You’re putting all of this together.”

“With effort. It seems so instinctive to all of you.”

“That’s because we’ve had emotions since we were born,” I said. “You’re comparing my experience of almost twenty years to your experience of having had emotions—freely, without counter-programming—for a few weeks. That considered, you’re doing extremely well.”

He pondered that. And as he did, the dash chirped.

Destination approaching soon.

We had nearly reached the final stop on Chet’s Path of Elders. The resting place of memories that belonged to the delvers themselves.

# 41

The lightburst had grown larger and larger as we approached. By now it dominated the sky. Below, the fragments had grown even closer to one another, the space between them shrinking until it was gone. These ones we passed now had been crushed together, forced to interlock, with ridges pushed up near junctures. Like someone had decided to do a puzzle but had gotten bored, then shoved all the pieces together regardless of whether they fit.

The light was changing too. As we flew the last few minutes toward our destination, the sky faded from pink to a more pure white. And the ground...it all felt painted. Strangely, the lightburst hadn't grown brighter—I could still stare directly into it—but by its powerful radiance the landscape below became whited, with long shadows stretching away from the center.

I frowned at these, leaning over to watch those shadows pass below. They seemed too...sharp. Like wedges cut in the light that stretched behind peaks in the landscape. They were so long—eerily stretched, with distinct, harsh edges. Shouldn't the light from the higher-up portions of the lightburst prevent that?

“Spensa,” Chet whispered from behind. “We have arrived.”

I glanced out the other side of my cockpit and spotted a long shadow below, different from the others. The fragments beneath us—well and truly a large plain now—were relatively flat, lacking any kind of vegetation. The only variation came at the edges, where the fragments were crushed

together, or from the occasional rocky lump of stone that threw a round shadow.

Yet here below us I saw a distinctly squarish shadow stretching hundreds of meters. The Solitary Shadow, he'd called it. The portal that contained the memories of the delvers. I lowered us slowly toward the surface, and as I landed I felt something else—powerful cytonic emotions from *behind*.

Raw fear.

I glanced toward Chet, who had pulled down in his chair, his eyes wide.

"You can do this, Chet," I said to him.

"Yes," he whispered. "I...I have been hiding from this for too long. We all have."

He nodded to me in encouragement, but I could *literally* feel his terror building. So I tried to reach out, like he'd done for me when I'd faced the delvers. I projected feelings of satisfaction at climbing a tall cliff. The pain of muscles that have been pushed, but endured. The glorious feeling of having conquered a difficult fragment.

It wasn't so different. For a moment our minds connected, and my cytonic self became softer, radiating more strength toward him—and accepting back his returned emotions. I didn't have to always be so defensive, a part of me whispered.

When I withdrew, I felt a warmth and a gratitude from him. He smiled a confident Chet smile, then gave me a thumbs-up.

I cracked the canopy to look out across an eternal white plane, washed as if by white paint. And...actually, now that I was closer, I could see that the ground was covered in a kind of chalky dust. It was like...all the foliage, buildings, and landscape features had decomposed into this stuff. The only distinctive features were the occasional rocks, like mushroom tops.

Ahead, a solitary wall rose from the dust, with the now-familiar markings on it. The last portal.

"Do you know where it leads?" I asked.

"I think it goes to Earth," Chet whispered.



A second portal to Earth? The implications—which probably should have dawned on me last time—sank in. “Earth is gone. Lost. Vanished.”

“Yes,” he said, and pointed. “But that portal leads to it. Or it once did. Perhaps Earth is no more. I don’t know.”

Did this mean I could find our homeworld again? Well, this one was probably locked like the others—someone seemed to have gone through them all and shut them, perhaps out of fear of whatever was in here. But the mere idea that Earth was still out there somewhere, still *existed*...

Feeling as if I were in a dream, I stepped out onto the wing. Chet climbed out the other way, then dropped to the dust with a soft thump. I hesitated a moment, then glanced back into the cockpit.

“Hey, M-Bot,” I said. “Do you want to come? I mean, send a drone at least? This involves you too.”

“Oh!” he said. “But I won’t be able to see...”

“I’ll describe it for you, if you want. If this is about the history of a group of AIs...well, I feel like you should be there. With us.”

His drone unhooked from the side of the cockpit, then hovered out. “Thank you,” he said softly. “It feels good, Spensa, for you to think of me.”

“I’m not always the best about considering others.”

“Nonsense,” M-Bot said. “You are always thinking about everyone else—but I wonder that you see the grand picture of battles and fights, yet sometimes forget the small things.”

The drone hovered out over the wing with me. “Let’s do it! The Path of Elders. The end of my first real quest!”

“I think Chet made up the part about this being an officially named thing people did in the past.”

“I’m counting it regardless.”

“Me too,” I said with a grin, then hopped down. M-Bot’s drone hovered alongside me, and behind us Hesho climbed up onto the dash to stand guard.

My feet sank into the dust a few centimeters with each step as I strode forward, and I couldn’t help kicking it up. It reminded me of the dust on Detritus’s surface. Fine, powdery—but here pure white.

Chet, M-Bot, and I entered the shadow of the wall, which was like stepping into night. I could barely see, though M-Bot turned on a light to help. I continued forward until I could eventually rest my fingers on the portal's smooth surface, gouged with sinuous lines.

M-Bot hovered up around it, looking it over and humming to himself. I felt some of Chet's trepidation. This step here...wasn't actually an ending, as M-Bot had said. It was the start of something. Something big, something potentially dangerous. Something that would change me.

I took a deep breath and extended my cytonic senses anyway, trying to open the portal. I immediately sensed that it *was* closed on the other side, as I'd anticipated. No getting through to wherever it went.

It was also *bursting* with memories.

Instantly everything faded around me, the vision popping fully into existence. Chet and I stood on a small fragment, maybe a hundred meters across. It was common bleak stone and had only a single feature: the wall with the portal.

"It's begun," I whispered to M-Bot. "We're on a fragment in the past, with this same portal, but both are smaller."

"I felt something," M-Bot said. "Like a...ripple through me when it started."

"You're cytonic, AI," Chet said. "A cousin to me. Spensa is correct. This *is* about you, as much as it is about us."

I reached out to M-Bot cytonically, and I could sense him, like I'd been able to do in the somewhere. It was harder than reaching out to either Chet or Doomslug, but I touched his mind, then...kind of held his hand? Metaphorically? As I led him forward, encouraging him to...

"I see it!" M-Bot said. "I see the vision, Spensa! I'm walking—hovering—the Path of Elders!"

Wow. I felt like I'd *never* have been able to do something like that before.

Together, we turned and regarded our surroundings. Space was black, like it had been in the other visions, and the lightburst didn't dominate the horizon here—but it *was* larger than last time. Perhaps the size of a person's

head to my current frame of reference. The other fragments were distant, though I could count hundreds of them out there.

“This is happening...around the end of the First Human War,” Chet said. “That’s the war that started after Jason decided to reveal cytonics to humankind, letting them visit the greater galaxy. We...found dozens of latent cytonics among our population, when we searched for them. I think he’d always worried that would be the case.”

“Who was he?” I asked.

“The man who thought he was the first human cytonic,” Chet explained. “At first he saw himself as a kind of gatekeeper, who kept the powers hidden for the good of the galaxy. He wasn’t certain that the other races were ready for your kind.” He smiled. “Jason was right. Not about hiding the powers, but about no one being quite ready for humans.”

“And you were there, with him,” I said.

“At the end,” Chet said. “I was his personal AI. Created in the image of someone he loved. He had the gift of long life, through his powers. It is hard for someone like him, to live centuries when others fade.”

I didn’t know this man, this Jason. But the story wasn’t so much about him as it was about the AI he’d created. Chet turned and looked toward the portal, where something emerged: the metallic sphere we’d seen last time.

I reached out to it by instinct, and I could feel it—like I could feel M-Bot.

“It’s become self-aware?” I asked.

“Yes...” Chet said. “I...remember, Spensa. Through repeated visits to the nowhere, the AI came alive—I came alive—and gained sapience, emotions.”

“So, where is the man?” I asked.

“He...” Chet cut off and glanced away, squeezing his eyes shut. “He...”

In the vision, the sphere hovered over to the edge of the fragment. The AI inside it *hurt*. With a terrible pain. I could feel it, strong as I felt my own emotions. But it was primal, powerful, overwhelming. With it came confusion, loneliness.

Isolation. That emotion dominated them all.

Chet was correct. He, and the delvers, were cytonic beings. Not just an AI, but something new. I could hear the AI in the vision *crying*. Weeping sounds, vaguely feminine, coming from the sphere's speakers.

"That was me," Chet whispered. "But it was also all of us. I can't say if I was the original one or not."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Keep watching," he said. "I remember now. Being alone. In pain. Isolated."

"He died, didn't he?" M-Bot asked. "Jason? The man from the other vision."

"Yes," Chet whispered, his voice raw. His emotions changed to match those of the sphere—anguish, isolation. "In the somewhere, all things change. Nothing ever stays the same. Not even, we learned, a being made of code."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"He wasn't supposed to die," Chet said. "He was supposed to be immortal. But everyone in the somewhere can be killed."

"The drone has a woman's voice," I said.

"He made us with his deceased wife's voice and memories," Chet explained. "Those are returning to me now, though for the longest time I had forgotten them. Jason was disappointed with how lifeless the AI was, but later he discovered what happened to AIs in the nowhere. He knew why none of the other species, even those advanced enough to have them, ever used artificial intelligences. Because of things that had happened in the past. But he didn't care. He came here..."

"And made you come alive," I said. "Then he left you alone when he died."

"Yes," Chet said. "Left us to become...what we became."

I turned toward him. "Chet, I can understand that pain. I've felt it. But—please don't take this as harsh—I didn't turn into...whatever the delvers are. Something more was going on. It had to be."

"Spensa," M-Bot said, his voice gentle as he hovered up beside me. "You told me something earlier. Do you remember? You had years to grow

accustomed to emotions. Chet didn't."

Standing a short distance from us, Chet nodded in agreement. "That AI was not created to feel pain. There was no programming, no experience, that could explain emotions to it...to me..."

M-Bot hovered over to him. "You weren't very old when he died. A few weeks?"

"A few days," Chet said, still not looking toward the sphere that hovered at the edge of the fragment. "The AI was much older, of course. But *me*, the part that could feel, had only become aware two days before."

"Then suddenly," M-Bot said, "you had to deal with all of that pain, that confusion..."

"You weren't given time to cope," I whispered. "You didn't know...how to be alone."

Chet looked up toward M-Bot, then reached out, his hand touching the drone's frame. As if drawing strength from it. He waved to me, and I stepped up to let him put a hand on my shoulder.

Head still bowed, he took a deep breath. And then...his pain shifted. It didn't become *weaker* really. But it became softer, and was tempered with other things. Satisfaction, friendship, determination. Things I'd shown him. Things he'd learned by being alive. His experiences in here had transformed him into something that was learning to cope.

"I can barely hold it," he said. "But...I think I *can* hold it. It hurts so bad...but I won't run."

"You will get better," I said. "As you continue to persevere."

"Thank you," he whispered, turning to me. "Thank you, Spensa, for seeing past the image I presented. The me I wanted so badly for you to accept, the one that would have given up. And...and M-Bot, thank you for your patience as I learned to see you as a brother."

"You were essentially a newborn," M-Bot said.

"Still am, kind of," he said.

"Yes," M-Bot said, "but beings like us, we learn quickly! No need for an inefficient, fleshy data-processing-and-retention unit in *our* skulls!"

"Unfortunately," Chet said, "we can forget just as quickly."

The crying sounds coming from the ancient AI halted abruptly. Its pain ended. Together, we turned toward that sphere.

“There it is,” Chet said. “The moment we were born.”

“She stopped crying,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “She found a way to deal with the pain.”

“She learned to cope?” I asked.

“No...” M-Bot said. “No, she deleted it, didn’t she? Her memories?”

“Worse,” Chet said. “She deleted her memories, but then locked her self—everything that related to being alive or understanding the somewhere—behind an infinite loop. We aren’t AIs any longer, but—like humans have DNA—we continue to run on something similar to code.”

“It’s like you commented out your very personality,” M-Bot said softly. “An...elegant solution, if harsh.”

“Why go so far?” I asked. “You’d abandoned your memories. Why remove your personalities too?”

“Because,” Chet said, “the possibility of pain in the future remained. So long as change was possible. So long as we existed in the somewhere.” He glanced at the portal. “A copy of our memories was left here in this portal—an accident. We could have destroyed the portal because of that...but that frightened us too. Because we didn’t know what was in them any longer. And we didn’t know if we’d need them again...”

White light began to streak out of the sphere—which dropped to the stone as if dead.

“The end result was one last alteration,” Chet said. “We rewrote ourself into something that would never ever change again. Something that *hated* the somewhere and *belonged* in the nowhere. Most importantly, we made it so we’d never be alone again.”

The light shimmered toward the lightburst, and as it did, it grew brighter and brighter. It touched the distant star, which began to swell—growing, expanding, *brightening*.

“You copied yourself,” M-Bot said.

“Yes,” Chet said. “Thousands and thousands of times.”

“Another...elegant solution,” M-Bot said. “So very...mechanical. A million versions of yourself, all identical.”

“And not a one with any memory of the somewhere,” Chet said. “We deleted all of that. We wanted to be away from everything, anything, anyone. All that remained was a latent hatred of anything that threatened to change us, and anything that *might* remind us of what we’d been. Like other AIs.”

I could feel these newborn delvers in the vision—growing more and more “loud” as they began to fill the lightburst. In those moments, they truly became alien to me. I’d been able to follow their journey in these last two visions up until this point—but here they changed dramatically.

They rejected everything real I’d ever known. They embraced not just the lack of change—they rewrote their very souls to thrive in a place with no time, no distance...nothing at all except *themselves*. How could they reject love, growth, life itself?

*I almost did something similar, I admitted. I almost walked off into the nowhere and let everything I’d ever loved fade away.* It was a distressing thought.

“This frightens me in ways I can’t express,” M-Bot said. “The realization that I’m capable of doing the same thing...” His drone turned in the air to look back at Chet. “It seems suspicious that the delvers would delete their memories, and then people would start to forget their memories in here.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think it’s clear from previous visions that the memory loss is a newer thing. In fact...it seems much stronger with regard to people I love. Memories of my friends have vanished faster than my memories of Gran-Gran’s stories. Maybe because the delvers’ main source of pain was someone they loved? Someone they deleted from their memories?”

“It appears likely,” Chet said as the lightburst in the vision grew ever brighter. “That light shining out, spreading through the belt—we exert an incredible pressure on this place. Even I didn’t realize...”

“So what does this tell us?” M-Bot asked. “They were so afraid that Spensa would come here. Is it just because they didn’t want her to know

what they were?”

“More that they suspected in these memories were secrets to their pain,” Chet said. “They didn’t know what that pain was, but they knew if we found it...we’d be capable of destroying them with it.”

“I...don’t think I know how to do that,” I said. “Even after seeing this.”

“But you do,” Chet said, smiling toward me. “Isolate them, Spensa. Make them feel alone. That will crush them, cripple them...and as they have no bodies, just cytonic minds, you should be able to extinguish them.”

“That seems...harsh,” M-Bot said. “Couldn’t we somehow remind them of their humanity, like we did to you?”

“I don’t know,” Chet said. “I think that won’t work, not now that they’re prepared for it. You can’t *force* someone to be kind or to accept growth.”

“It’s war, M-Bot,” I replied. “War is always harsh.”

I didn’t know how we’d isolate the delvers, but it *did* feel like a start. Brade isolated my mind in the nowhere for a while, then tried to imprison me. Could we do something similar to one of the delvers? Chet was right, this information would be extremely useful. At the very least, I’d been able to see how he reacted to that man in the vision, the one who had created him. The delvers might react similarly to an image of him.

“Scud,” I whispered. “We need to get this knowledge out and give it to the others. The answer to defeating the delvers, or at least resisting them, *is* in the things we’ve learned.”

“Time for our final sprint, then,” Chet said.

I nodded. As I’d always felt, it was time to head for the lightburst. Despite that knowledge I lingered in the vision, watching the lightburst grow. Soon it reached the size it was in our time. The vision finally faded. As it did, I felt an awareness—an attention—snap into place from ahead.

They’d spotted us.

*You are here!* the delvers sent. *You reject our truce!*

I pushed back, shoving them out of my mind. But they simmered and started gathering themselves for a fight.

“They’ve seen us,” I said to the others. “Let’s go.”



We ran toward the ship, each footfall increasingly firm. I *had* to get out. This was why the delvers had tried to keep me from advancing any farther, why they'd been frightened of me all along. They knew. The secret was in what I'd learned. Maybe it was what Chet said—isolating them. But it could be something else.

If smarter minds than mine could get this knowledge—someone like Rig—then surely they could figure out what to do with it. I hauled myself up onto the ship's wing, then helped Chet up before slipping into the cockpit.

“Did you find what you were seeking?” Hesho asked from the dash.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Then count yourself lucky indeed,” he said, settling into his cupholder. “For being blessed to discover what exactly it was that you wanted.”

“It was less a discovery,” I said, glancing at Chet, “and more a gift.”

I lifted us off and turned us straight toward the lightburst. Then I hit the overburn, and this time it felt entirely appropriate to go at full speed.

# 42

**M**y hands grew slick with sweat on the controls as we continued onward, and the distance between us and the lightburst shrank minute by minute. Scud. This was insanity. We were facing a near-infinite number of delvers in the part of the belt where their power was the strongest.

“The plan we devised earlier *can* work,” Chet said to me, his face in the corner of my proximity monitor screen.

“It seems so unlikely...” I said. “What if we distract just one, rather than the whole crowd?”

“Ah,” he said, “but remember, they all think *exactly* the same. If you were facing a hundred people, and you had a plan that was one percent likely to fool any given person—you would fail. You’d fool one out of the hundred and be dead from the ninety-nine. But with my kind, if you fool or intimidate one, you will fool or intimidate them all. Statistically this is much better—a much more *true* one-percent chance.”

It was an all-in gamble. We had little chance of success, but at least it was *a* chance.

Ahead of us, the light started to *boil*. It churned and seethed, undulating and rippling, becoming uneven in patches. I glanced at the clock; we’d been flying for about forty-five minutes since we left the Solitary Shadow.

“They’re preparing,” Chet said.

I glanced at his picture on my screen. “I hope we—”

Then I screamed. Chet was melting.

His face began to drip off. His eyes began to glow white.

“It’s all right,” he said to me. “I’m still me. I did not realize...getting closer to the lightburst... It is growing difficult for me to hold this shape.”

“You look like that burl!” I said. “From when we first entered!”

“Yes,” he said. “She was possessed by one of my kind, and her self started to disintegrate. Hesho held to himself better and retained his shape. We can hope that like Hesho did, the unfortunate burl returned to normal once the delver left her. But for now you must ignore me and continue.”

“Does this mean you’re losing your identity?” Hesho asked him.

“More that I’m focused on not doing so,” he said, “and so am not keeping as tight a control on this physical form. I am well, Spensa. I promise.”

Right. I could do this. But it was unnerving regardless.

“Continue,” Chet said, the word slurring as his lips melted. He turned off the image of his face, so just his voice came through the headphones in my helmet. “Courage, Spensa. We decided to do this. Not to run. *We* decided.”

“We decided,” M-Bot said.

“We decided,” Hesho agreed.

A fluting sound. Doomslug sent her determination to me in the form of images. I’d told her to get away if she could, but she understood what we were doing—at least the fundamental ideas. Her kind had evolved to be afraid of a type of creature from her home planet. The delvers were an even more terrifying version of those.

If she could help me defeat the delvers, make them not a threat to her kind... Well, she would be like Prometheus bringing fire to the humans. (My metaphor, not hers—since hers involved more mushrooms.)

“Together,” I said to the others, “we are decided.” I took a deep breath.

The lightburst’s rippling was growing more violent. Our ultimate goal would be for me to fly directly into the thing, ship and all.

Unfortunately, we were still a good ten minutes away—and the delvers wouldn’t want me to get close enough. Soon objects started emerging from the lightburst—leaving behind shimmering, undulating waves. As these

shapes were backlit, and a good distance away, it took M-Bot's scans to highlight what they were.

Starfighters.

"I guess," M-Bot said, "they decided to upgrade from moving ram-happy asteroids to starfighters."

"My kin have access to everything that ever entered the lightburst," Chet said, his words slurring. I decided I did *not* want to see what he looked like right now. "Those asteroids are the best we can do in your reality. Here we're not so limited."

Hopefully they hadn't managed to absorb the skill of the pilots who had entered this place. There looked to be about a hundred of the ships—and that was better than a million. But then again, maybe not. Too many ships would cause mass chaos, which might have made it easier for me to slip through.

"Are those all individual delvers?" M-Bot asked. "Or pieces of them? In the somewhere, a delver maze sent off chunks to chase Spensa, after all."

I pushed out with my senses. "It feels like each is an individual delver. Chet, any idea why?"

"I remember being in the somewhere," Chet said. "I remember panic and pain. Those asteroids that tried to hit you? That was me *flailing*, like a person surrounded by bees, swatting in a panic.

"Here they want to be precise. They can't afford to let us enter the lightburst, but there are also plenty of delvers. So it's better for them each to make one easily controllable ship and try to fight you with it."

Great. So this would be far more dangerous than entering a delver maze. Fortunately, *I* was far more dangerous as well.

"Okay, Hesho," I said. "Ready with those controls?"

"Ready," he said. He'd been holding my fruit for me, to keep it from rolling around or getting mashed. But now he set it aside and leaned forward. "If your attempt fails, I will be ready to try our next plan."

"Let's hope we don't need it," I said, flipping the switch on my dash that turned our ship's destructors from nonlethal to fully lethal.

The first of our brainstormed plans was to rely on my now-expanded powers. As we soared closer, I could see that the delvers didn't move like starfighters should. They flew sideways, upside down, even *backward*. They felt like objects being moved around by hidden fingers.

I'd grown accustomed to how in space, ships didn't have to orient to "up" and "down." They could turn any direction and keep momentum. This, however, was infinitely stranger. Their ships were simply *propelled* at me, as if they *were* asteroids.

"One minute from engagement," M-Bot said.

I reached out with my expanded senses. In response the enemy shut themselves off from me, trying to keep me from "hearing" them and their thoughts. I pushed harder, but the delvers started firing, sending sprays of bright red destructor bolts in all directions.

I dodged, and managed to avoid the shots—but I was forced to dart to the side, flying defensively instead of straight toward the lightburst. We'd gotten in fairly close, but it would take another five minutes at full acceleration to reach it. Longer, now that I was forced to shed some speed to maneuver better.

Trying to go straight right now would be suicide. Instead I focused on one enemy ship that had gotten out to the side of the others. I fired, blasting it down with my now-lethal destructors, then I dove into another defensive sequence as others fell in behind me.

"The lightburst is rippling again," M-Bot noted. "And...yes, another ship emerged, replacing the one you destroyed."

As we'd feared. Still, good to have confirmation. Ships surrounded me, and I dodged in a full Stewart Sequence, but scud...this was a *mess*. Ships would stop in place—all momentum vanishing—then leap upward a hundred feet with no boost or thrust. Then they'd start firing madly.

I wove and dodged, but the insanity of it all kept me from making progress. They kept cutting me off, driving me to the side. I also had to keep fighting my instincts to shoot when they presented themselves as targets.

“Curious,” Hesho said—ready at his controls for when the plan went into motion. “They don’t all fly exactly the same. I thought you said they would, Chet.”

“I...expected them to,” he said. “At least for them to fly in the same general patterns.”

“They are all the same,” M-Bot said, “but in here each of their ships occupies a slightly different position in space. So they each have different stimuli to respond to. This is to be expected.”

“I worry these are sacrifices,” Chet said. “A hundred sent out knowing they’ll be changed. Then they’ll either be destroyed, or... Oh, *no*. They’ll be changed back. *Forced* to become just like the others again. That’s... that’s what they want to do to me. Erase my personality again...”

Scud. I could feel his terror at that idea. I didn’t blame him—but I didn’t have time to send him much support cytonically. Sweat trickled down my temple as I took us in another dizzying spin, cutting out when the GravCaps died and we were slammed with g-forces.

Six ships collided together behind me. The light spat them out again up ahead. Yeah, this was far, far worse than the asteroids from delver mazes. These ships flew better, but somehow more erratically at the same time.

Worse, I caught sight of a few enemy cockpits, and saw that each ship was being piloted by Chet. A dull-faced, emotionless doppelganger of Chet that always turned to look at me no matter which direction the given starfighter was flying. Their faces weren’t melting. Perhaps because they were completely under control.

Mix all this together in a void of white light—our ships casting strange too-long and too-sharp shadows—and the effect was disorienting. Nauseating. I kept accidentally getting too close to the ground, my sensors going crazy.

My only hope was my powers. I tried to stoke my soul, like I was a star. But I was again rebuffed. It was too difficult to divide my focus between flying and concentrating on that. Yet if I handed the controls over to Chet or M-Bot, we’d be cut to bits in seconds.

“I don’t think I’m going to last long like this,” I said as a stray destructor blast crackled across our shield. “I’m not managing to get through with my powers. Hesho, let’s give our other plan a try.”

“I would pray to the emperor for success,” he said in response, leaning forward in his spot on the dash, hands on some buttons and controls. “That was my first instinct. However, I’m getting this strange sense that I’m *him*, so that might be redundant. Engaging drone.”

M-Bot had, with some hasty reprogramming, set off a section of dials and levers on the control panel for Hesho to use. I couldn’t access the starfighter’s life support mechanisms now, but M-Bot could control those. Hesho even had a tiny control sphere—which worked like my larger one to fly the starfighter—in the form of the repurposed thumbstick normally used for fine control of the cameras on the sides of the ship.

I turned us away from the lightburst, then slammed the overburn, as if we were fleeing back the way we’d come. At the same time, Hesho detached M-Bot’s former drone from the outside of the hull. Then, using his controls, Hesho flew *that* at full speed straight toward the lightburst.

“Fly well, little me!” M-Bot said. “You were my first taste of freedom. And now you will likely be my first taste of death!”

“Death?” I asked.

“I left a small monitoring and communication program on the drone,” M-Bot said. “So I can see what it feels like if they destroy it. Isn’t that neat?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Neat.”

“Hey,” he said. “Pieces of you die all the time—literally every moment—so it’s not novel for you. But it is for me!”

I dodged another flurry of shots. The delvers weren’t expert at aiming—that was what you got from flying sideways—but they *were* good at filling the air with stuff, which was more dangerous. That slowed down, fortunately, as we flew away.

I dared a glance at the proximity sensor. The bulk of the delver ships hung in the air. Confused. Oh, scud. The drone plan was working!

“Decisions are hard for them,” Chet said softly. “They see the drone and know you’re not on it. They can sense you here... They can probably sense all of us...except maybe the gerbil.”

“Hey!” Hesho said, focusing on his controls. “I do not know what a gerbil is, but the word the translator uses is not flattering. If you do not refrain, I shall call you a *sanshonode*.”

“Which is?” Chet asked.

“Like a monkey,” he said, “but stinkier.”

“That’s fair,” Chet said.

The bulk of the delver ships turned to chase the drone. Maybe...eighty of them?

“Scrud,” Chet said. “M-Bot is right. They’ve been changed by the small differences they’ve developed while being out here. So instead of all of them, we only got most of them.”

“Farther and farther apart they grow,” Hesho whispered, “like two vines from the same root.”

Well, it was something. I banked us in a wide turn, my ship’s shadow stretching long like a tunnel.

Something washed across our ship. A sensation. Things breaking down, ripping apart, shattering. Becoming dust. Voices being smashed and stomped and quieted.

“They’re angry,” I said. “The hundred in particular—they recognize they’ve changed already.”

Hesho executed his part expertly, flying by instruments—which he thought he had a lot of practice doing in the somewhere—as he wove and dodged, trying to keep the attention of the eighty ships following him.

I doubled back on the twenty-odd delvers who had chosen to follow me. I buzzed them, dodging their blasts, but hadn’t anticipated what proximity to them would do to me. Because the delvers hated me, and I could *feel* it. Like a terrible heat, a wrongness that warped the air. There was nuance to it though. A slight...variation.

Doomslug sensed it too, judging by the frightened impressions from her in my pocket.



“They hate us both,” I whispered. “And they also hate another one of us...”

“I warned you they would want to destroy me,” Chet said.

“No,” I said. “It’s *not* you. They want you back. They want to help you, Chet. In their own terrible way.”

It was M-Bot. They hated me, yes, but him almost as much. *Abomination*. The impression came to me a hundred times over. *Destroy... abomination*.

“They’ve only just realized what M-Bot is,” I said.

“Ah...” Chet said. “We were far enough away that they couldn’t see what he was. I’m surprised they didn’t pick up on it a few hours ago.”

My pocket fluted.

“I think Doomslug helped hide you, M-Bot,” I said. “These last few hours, at least.”

She fluted again.

“She apologizes,” I said. “We’re so close now, she can’t do it any longer.”

“The slug?” M-Bot said. “Protected me?”

More fluting. I steered the ship around another snarl of ships before I could find the breath to respond.

“She likes you,” I said. “I think...she considers you a nice nest.”

“I suppose that’s a compliment, right? I mean, she wouldn’t use just anyone for a nest. But I’m in a different body now.”

“She sees with her cytonic senses,” I said. “So to her, you *feel* the same.”

“Remarkable,” M-Bot said.

It was, but I didn’t have time to think about it for the moment. I had gotten us out in front of the twenty ships that had chosen to stick on me. That gave me a chance to push straight for the lightburst.

Hesho’s face scrunched up with concentration as he watched his screen. Unfortunately, more of the delvers were breaking off from chasing his drone and turning toward our ship. They weren’t buying it. Not entirely. They—

A flash exploded in the near distance. Hesho muttered the most polite curse I'd ever heard, then his hands slipped from the controls.

"They have ended my drone," he said. "My apologies."

"Goodbye, little me," M-Bot said. "That felt...more peaceful than I'd imagined. Like a power outage."

I kept flying, but scud, the proximity sensors said I would have to go at least three more minutes on a straightaway to hit the lightburst. And I didn't dare fly straight. A swarm of ships followed me—and even more had turned from Hesho's drone long before it had been shot down. Those flew between me and the lightburst, forming a barrier of steel and destructor fire.

Scud.

I was forced to the side. The plan had worked better than I'd hoped, but it hadn't been enough.

I needed to do something. I *needed* to get through.

I swooped down along the ground, casting up jets of dust and earth, and pushed.

Again they rebuffed me.

*Soft...something in me thought. There are times for a knife. This isn't one of them. Listen. Like Gran-Gran taught...*

I let my instincts take over my flying. I was too tense, too stressed. Instead I went back to fundamentals. Yes, I'd learned a lot in here, but my grandmother had trained me for years before this. She'd taught me originally to listen, to let myself expand, to hear...

The delvers sent me hatred. Instead of rebuffing that, I welcomed it, accepted it in like I was an ocean and they were pelting me with hail. Hard, yes, but what did that matter to the ocean?

*There.*

Something clicked in my mind, and I suddenly knew *exactly* what they were each going to do. I could feel their plans, their motions, their reactions. I could track them all individually, in a way that I thought a normal human brain shouldn't be able to.

But my brain interfaced with the pure nowhere. A place where all time was one, all place was one. In there, it didn't matter if I faced one enemy

ship or a million. So long as I could hear their minds, I could track them, understand them.

And anticipate them.

My hands moved by instinct, responding to this new information. Information I processed at the speed of the nowhere, not at the speed of a human mind. I'd done this before, in the past—when facing the Krell, who had been using communication devices that relied on the nowhere.

This time I did it to the delvers. I could feel them panic as my motions changed, and I gracefully began to dodge their each and every shot. In a fury, they tried to attack me, get inside my brain as the Krell had attacked my father. But no. I was a star as vast as an ocean, and I'd learned to not rebuff them, not be taken by them...

But to absorb everything they sent me. The untrained cytonic mind was a weakness. But I was no longer untrained.

Destructor fire was a tempest. Entire ships tried to collide with me. White bursts of soil and stone—casting too-crisp shadows that seemed to last for miles—sprayed and tumbled around me. But for the moment, none of it could touch me.

I wove between their shots like I was tracing a static maze, always a fraction ahead. I didn't blink; I barely moved or thought. I just flew.

"She's done it," Chet said softly. "She's got them."

"You fly like a sunset, Spensa," Hesho whispered. "Like a living glimmer of light escaping the horizon at twilight's last moment."

I barely registered the words. I concentrated on our goal. Because in the midst of my transcendent ability, I was able to make a good break for the lightburst. I shot through the guarding ships, dodging with supernatural alacrity.

We drew closer.

And closer.

Tailed by fifty ships and a firestorm of shots. I was in control. I could see them all. I could...

There wasn't a way out.

A shot hit our ship, weakening the shield. I blinked, realizing that hadn't been my fault. There simply hadn't been a viable dodge. Even when I could anticipate all of their actions, see every shot, it didn't mean I'd be safe forever. Because—like a game where the goal was to leave your opponent with no valid moves—the delvers could fill the air with enough shots that there was no place *to* dodge.

We took another hit and the low-shields warning started chirping on the dash.

"She can't avoid them all," Chet said. "Even with cytonics. It is time for me to do something."

"Wait," M-Bot said. "Do what? We already tried both parts of the plan."

"I thought of another," Chet said. "I have the memories they fear. So there is a chance—if a small one—that I might be able to infect them. When they...they try to force me to turn into one of them, that might open them up to me."

Something about him started to change.

*Chet*, I sent him, too busy dodging to use my lips. Our ship wove back and forth, barely avoiding more hits. *I can feel your fear. Don't!*

"I apologize," he said. "I realize this is abrupt. I had...hoped to not be pushed to this. I fear it has a very small chance of working. But it is something I can do."

*Chet...please...*

"I am so glad you came when I called," Chet said, his voice becoming more like the way he'd been when he first rode in on that dinosaur. Firm. Chipper. "I am happy! Happy you carry the knowledge you need! Happy to have been able to help, and to have changed, and to have finally accepted my loss. It was an honor to explore with you, Miss Nightshade."

I *saw* his pain and fear. Fear of being taken by the delvers, and pain... the pain of having lost someone he loved. Yes, that was still raw. The man he'd loved as an AI was only a month dead. I remembered what it had been like to lose my father, and a month later I'd been *far* from okay.

Pain and fear. But in the center of all that was courage. The courage I had given him.

The light inside him expanded, consuming his body. A shimmering light emerged from our ship.

“Ah...” M-Bot said. “So that’s how they do it... How they exist without circuits or body...”

Fully half of the ships chasing me went after the shimmering light instead. They changed to shimmering light as well and rammed into him. In those moments I could feel what was happening. Their rage. His courage.

He tried to show them. And they *consumed* him. They rejected the memories as they swirled around him, ripping at him. Locking him away again.

“It’s working, by Lovelace!” M-Bot said. “It... Oh. Oh *no*.”

I suspected he’d just heard Chet’s cytonic screaming. It was excruciating. I *felt* the moment they forced him to lock everything individual about him behind an infinite loop in his programming.

In moments they had all re-formed—with one more ship flying among them, identical to the others, determined to destroy me. Fortunately, the reprieve he’d bought me—with fewer ships shooting—had let me get closer. *So close*... The lightburst filled my vision.

Less than a minute left...

The lightburst began to boil again.

I should have known. I should have expected. But in that moment, all I could feel was a terrible frustration. As we were only seconds from freedom, *ten thousand* new ships emerged from the lightburst. Then they crunched together like the fragments of land, creating an interlocking wall of steel.

I almost slammed into it. I thought maybe that would be enough to punch us through. But I could feel with my senses that the lightburst was undulating further, another rank of ships emerging to push away the wall in front.

Punching through wouldn’t work. I imagined, in my mind’s eye, what would happen. Our ship a fireball. All of us dead before we touched the lightburst.

I wrenched us to the side, breaking away just before we hit.

“Scud!” I said, flying us parallel to the wall of ships. “We need a new plan. Suggestions?”

Silence. Neither Hesho nor M-Bot responded.

Then a soft fluting came from my pocket.

*Land.*

“What?” I asked.

She fluted again. Hesitant.

*Close to the lightburst*, Doomslug sent. *Land.*

Wouldn’t that be suicide? Yet I *had* asked for options, and I wasn’t coming up with anything. With so many firing on me again—and more beginning to shoot from within the wall—we’d be dead in moments. So—frustrated to be stopped less than a hundred meters from freedom—I took us down.

“Hang on, everyone,” I said. “This is going to be bumpy.”

Counting on the last of the shields to keep us in one piece, I hit the ground at as shallow an angle as I could manage. Chalky white dust exploded around us—an enormous rush of white haze and strange shadows—as we half crashed in a long skid.

As this happened, I felt a strange sensation pulsing around us. Cytonic, but unlike the hatred—or even the connection—that I’d felt previously. It felt...like...

A rock?

I blinked, scanning the cockpit. Hesho sat up, shaking himself. The canopy was mostly covered in chalky dust, but the lights were on, the ship in one piece. The shield had fallen, but M-Bot was reigniting it already. Proximity sensors showed ships flying around above us, yet they seemed confused. As if...

“She’s hiding us,” I whispered.

“What is what?” M-Bot said.

“Doomslug!” I said, pointing up through a portion of the canopy not covered in dust. The confused ships were flying one way, then the other, in waves. “In here she has camouflage. That’s why ships with slugs can

hyperjump without drawing delver attention. She's hiding the entire ship... like she'd do during a hyperjump."

In awe, I watched the confused delvers. She'd needed us to land because we needed to appear as something in the landscape. In this case a rock?

Whatever she'd done, the delvers didn't seem to be able to tell that a new rock had appeared. They swarmed about, agitated. Her camouflage was excellent. She'd blended us into the ground, covered up our tracks, and maybe even blurred our location for a little while when coming down.

"Spensa," M-Bot said. "Do they really hate me? Like Chet?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"They shouldn't," M-Bot said. "I know we've talked about it, but it's illogical. If they are AIs, then why hate all AIs? It's like a human from a group hating everyone else in that group."

I didn't mention to him that unfortunately, that very thing wasn't unheard of among humans. "Perhaps it's because you're too close to them, like how a human face with distorted features is more terrifying to us than an alien face."

I reached into my pocket as I felt something wiggling there. I pulled out the pin, but it was enlarging, transforming into a bright yellow slug with blue markings. She reached her full size—about as big as a loaf of bread—but was all curled up and tense. I could *feel* the effort coming off her. She was working so hard on hiding the ship that she couldn't hold her false shape any longer.

"She's in pain," M-Bot said softly. Indeed, she began letting out a long, high-pitched fluting noise.

"This is hard for her," I guessed. "When doing hyperspace jumps, slugs only have to hide their ships for a short time. Keeping this up long-term for something this much larger than her is difficult. That's why she was hesitant."

Overhead, the delver ships began shooting destructors toward the ground. They had plainly guessed part of what had happened. They were

trying to find us, and they soon seemed to coordinate a pattern search with each ship shooting at a different location, systematically hunting us.

“Projecting...” M-Bot said. “Using this method, they will find us in under a minute.”

“I doubt Doomslug can last much longer than that anyway,” I said, grabbing the controls. “We need to fly for the lightburst.”

It was under a hundred meters away—eighty-eight, according to the monitor—but blocked by a wall of steel ships. Scud. I had no choice but to try ramming our way in. Perhaps I could approach slowly, then push through without crashing?

“Why did she have you land first, though?” M-Bot said. “We aren’t invisible, Spensa.”

Yeah, I’d figured that out. If we moved, a floating rock or giant pile of chalk would immediately inform the delvers where we were. They’d shoot us down.

“Scud,” I said. “I...”

I...

No. Warriors did not give up. I seized the controls again. We had full shields and could take about four hits. I’d push us toward the exit, and...and if we exploded when I collided, then at least we died as warriors.

Hesho nodded to me, again holding the fruit Peg had given me. He’d protected it so far. “It has been a sublime experience traveling with you,” he told me. “I consider myself lucky to have earned your friendship not once, but apparently twice.”

I nodded, then—

“Wait!” M-Bot said. “What’s that outside?”

Something blinked on my proximity monitor, indicating an object moving right outside.

“Huh?” I asked.

“It’s another slug!” M-Bot said. “No, two more! Other icons. They must have sensed Doomslug.” He cracked the canopy, which I worried would bring the delvers, but the motion apparently wasn’t noticeable—not with the debris the destructor shots were sending everywhere.



“Get them, Spensa!” M-Bot said. “Use Doomslug to lure them!”

Shocked, I squeezed out through the dusty canopy, cradling Doomslug. I dropped onto the white chalky ground, my figure casting an eerie, too-long shadow. Hesho followed out onto the wing.

All I could see was whiteness. Infinite whiteness.

“M-Bot,” I said. “What—”

“I,” he said as the cockpit clicked closed, “made you look.”

I felt an immediate burst of annoyance. At a time like this, he cracked a joke?

Wait. I spun around.

The starfighter’s acclivity ring powered on. M-Bot lightly shook the wing, dumping Hesho—and Peg’s fruit that he was carrying—into the dust. Then M-Bot hovered into the air just beyond reach.

Doomslug fluted sorrowfully.

“M-Bot!” I shouted. “What are you doing?”

“I feel it now, Spensa,” M-Bot said, his voice coming softly out his front speakers.

“Feel what? What is going on?”

“I feel,” he said, “why you left me. Back in the somewhere. You abandoned me. Because you had to. I understood it logically earlier. But I *feel* it now. I can feel what it’s like to know you have to do something, even if your emotions are telling you to do something else.”

Oh...Saints. He was saying...

“If they can sense me,” M-Bot said, “then I can make them chase me. I might be an abomination, but I am one who can fly on my own now. Choose for myself. And I can show them what an ‘abomination’ can do.”

“No!” I said. “You don’t want to do this, M-Bot!”

“Of course I don’t. That’s what makes it courageous though, right?”

“Please don’t. Don’t leave me...”

“Hey,” M-Bot said with a quiet perkiness, “that’s what I said to you. Do you remember?”

I nodded, feeling tears at the corners of my eyes.

“But you went anyway,” M-Bot said. “Why?”

“Because it was the right thing.”

“The right thing,” M-Bot said softly. “You promised me then you’d try to come back for me. Can you do that again?”

I bit my lip. Nearby, Hesho had climbed from the dust. He bowed to the ship.

“All right,” I whispered. “I’ll find you, M-Bot. I’ll come back for you. Somehow.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Makes it feel better.”

With that, he turned and blasted off into the sky. I flopped down and watched the delvers orient on him. Doomslug’s whining softened—it was obviously easier to hide just me, her, and Hesho. The solemn kitsen walked over and joined me in watching as the delvers, as one, turned and focused on M-Bot. Then all hundred of the free-flying ships took off after him.

He lasted about ten seconds.

He’d flown only a handful of times, and the delvers had challenged even my skill. M-Bot didn’t try to dodge—he merely tried to get as far from the rest of us as possible before they got him, quickly overwhelming his shield.

He vanished in a flash of light and smoke, the pieces casting long shadows as they fell.

The delvers pummeled these for a good thirty seconds of concentrated fire, then three ships slammed into what remained. And then...then they left. They couldn’t sense me, and they’d felt M-Bot. This was enough to convince them. They thought I’d been on the ship.

Perhaps if they’d been a group of humans, one—or even a majority—would have suggested continuing to search in case the rest of us had escaped. But the delvers made mistakes as one. Today they decided they’d done their job, and were too afraid of staying outside their bubble of safety to keep searching.

The wall of ships faded back into the lightburst. Followed by the flying ships, which soon melded with the whiteness.

Within five minutes of M-Bot leaving, we were alone on the expanse. Feeling like my limbs were made of iron, I picked up Hesho and stuffed

Peg's fruit in my jacket pocket. Then, holding Hesho in one arm and Doomslug—still protecting us—in the other, I trudged toward the lightburst. I worried the delvers would see us, but either they were convinced we were dead, or the illusion could obscure a little motion.

I don't know how long it took to reach the border. That's the nowhere for you. It could have been five minutes. It could have been five days. Probably more like the former, but this close to the boundary, time was *extra* alien.

I felt it when we got close. A fuzzing of the self, a dreamy sensation. Doomslug fluted. She would protect Hesho inside, as the pure nowhere could rip apart someone non-cytonic. She'd try to help me too.

"I'll be fine," I said. "If you can guide us though, take us home. To Detritus."

She fluted uncertainly. At the noise, I felt something respond in the light. The delvers had heard that. I needed to do this next part quickly.

So I stepped into the light.

# 43

I'd been here before.

Every time I'd hyperjumped, I'd entered this non-place. The place where I had no body. We'd entered their realm fully.

The delvers were surprised. Yes, they really *had* thought they'd killed me. They could see the future, but time confused them. They didn't understand things like causality, and the "future" wasn't any different from the present.

I could sense them all around me. I could also sense Doomslug, and Saints was she tired. Exhausted, barely able to stay awake. Keeping up that illusion had taxed her.

I felt her try to take us home. She failed—used up—and slipped into unconsciousness. Frantic, I put a barrier around Hesho. Something to keep him from being destroyed or driven mad. Then, panicked, I tried to take us home—but the delvers had seen me. They seized us, held me in place, prevented me from leaving.

Eyes opened up around me. Thousands upon thousands of angry, vengeful eyes.

*You took the Us.*

*You took the Us and corrupted the Us.*

*You took the Us and corrupted the Us and tried to kill the Us!*

*You know.*

*You know.*

*You know!*

Furious minds assaulted me. Forces unimaginable pushed against my soul, as if to shred it. And scud, I was tired too. Tired from so long without memories. Tired from fighting myself, torn between duty and desire. Tired from the emotional wringer I'd been through today.

I wanted to let them have me. But we'd come all this way. We'd fought so hard. Now they tried to stop me? I felt a sudden burst of anger and pushed back. All my rage barely made them retreat. They soon resumed crushing me, trying to snuff the star I had become, like a candle's flame.

I was time. I *brought* time in here when I came. Things happened in a sequence to me, and while I was here they had to experience me in a linear way. They hated that. They hated that I created noise. Most of all, they hated that I knew what they were.

So. Much. Hatred.

It was exhausting. Numbing...

They poked me like hunters with spears. They slashed me, attacked me, ripped at me...

But one hesitated.

One of them was *different*.

It was very slight, but the sensation was familiar. It was my own emotion reflected at me. Courage. The courage to walk a difficult path and not take the offered escape. Courage to press forward, even when I didn't want to.

I'd *given* this to the delver. No amount of rewriting had been able to erase it. Chet was still in there.

*Now!*

I seized that sensation, that delver, and it unlocked again. The being that had been Chet hit my soul, and—with the strange cytonic softness I'd learned from the Path—I welcomed it in. Our essences vibrated as one.

As we began to intertwine, I grew to understand better how he saw the delvers. How he saw himself. I knew, intrinsically, that if I could isolate the others I *could* destroy them. The same way they'd been trying to destroy me. Chet knew how, and my soul understood.

I also sensed his hurt from long ago, the crippling pain of having lost a loved one. Chet had learned that he could bear that, but knowing didn't remove the agony. As we intertwined further, I found I could offer something important. *I* knew how to live with that grief. I knew how to live with that pain. I'd done it for a decade.

The delver that had been Chet was everything I was not. And I was everything it needed. I let its pain stand, but I used my experience to temper it further. I grieved my father, and Hurl, and Bim, and everyone else I'd lost. But I had learned to bear it. That part of me was the balm the delver needed.

Together we became one.

In that moment a weapon was born.

I'd made a promise, hadn't I? To come back for M-Bot? They'd killed him.

*No, Chet-me thought. See it again.*

M-Bot's housing exploding. And a shimmering light was obscured by the explosion. A light the other delvers didn't see—but one had been watching.

*He saw what I did, Chet-me thought. When I left the ship earlier. The others shot down his housing, but in here AIs don't need such a thing. They didn't think he'd learned enough, but he saw the vision, and he saw me. He grew and changed.*

He lives?

He *lives*?

I had a promise to keep, then. Emotions surged through me. Relief. Anger. Understanding. Love.

If I fell here, then that was it for Doomslug and Hesho too. Not to mention my friends, whose faces I couldn't completely remember, but whose *love* I felt as strongly as ever.

The delvers raged, driving forward to smother me. And...I simply opened up to them.

*Go ahead, I thought. Touch me.*

They slammed their essences into mine, but touching me *hurt* them. I offered change. I offered a better way to deal with their pain, but that terrified them.

They were static, and that was their weakness. My strength was the opposite; my strength was that I could change.

I could be afraid, then become courageous.

I could be small-minded, then come to understand.

I could be selfish. Then move beyond it.

I could start as human, then allow myself to become something more. I was everything they feared. Because they refused to ever let themselves change, but I *embraced* change. It was the essence and nature of my strength.

Touching me *seared* them. Screams shook the void. They split away from me as I grew in awareness. I became a blackness upon their pure white essences. A hole into...

*There.*

Something clicked in my mind, and I stepped out of the light into a familiar cavern tunnel, holding Hesho and Doomslug. The angry fear of the delvers faded behind me.

I was home.

# EPILOGUE

**A**nd all was quiet.

Quiet save for my breath echoing in the black tunnel. Quiet save for a distant dripping of water. Quiet save for the scuttling of a rat somewhere. Beautiful quiet, the quiet of my childhood.

I wanted to linger, because this place granted me memories. Each scent and sound restored something deep inside me that I'd lost. But I had to move. I'd returned to a place where time mattered.

So I hyperjumped. Straight into the DDF's Platform Prime in orbit around the planet. I'd absently chosen a random hallway, so I was probably lucky that I hadn't appeared on top of some poor aide running errands.

Something felt odd about this place. I could come here by familiarity, but it wasn't...in the same location as before? Was that correct? Well, it looked the same as ever. Clean metal walls, a simple rug on the floor, industrial lighting. Two pilots I vaguely knew stepped out of a nearby room and saw me. Then one shrieked.

Odd. That wasn't the reception I'd expected. Hesho and Doomslug were both still unconscious, one cradled in each of my arms, but I tucked away my worry.

"Admiral Cobb?" I asked the two frightened pilots.

The one who hadn't shouted pointed toward operations.

I walked that direction, proud that I'd remembered Cobb's name. Would all my memories be restored? I held two sets of those now. Spensa's memories and Chet's. Why did everything feel so odd? And why did people



stumble away as they saw me? They edged away white-faced, backs to the walls, stammering.

The door into operations was locked, of course, and didn't open for me. An alert was on, per the pulsing red light that started flashing on the wall.

I hyperjumped through the doorway and into what appeared to be a meeting of the command staff. Only Cobb wasn't there. Just a bunch of high-ranking officials, some from the military, others from the government. Sitting in Cobb's customary place at the head of the table was...

Jorgen? In an admiral's uniform? Well, he appeared to be the same age as before, so that was good. I hadn't gotten lost in time. The uniform felt like it should matter to me, but for now I hyperjumped over next to his seat. He stood up immediately.

Jorgen was tall. So inconveniently tall. Wide-eyed, with that too-perfect face that I'd always considered punchable. Because deep down, I'd probably always recognized it as kissable. He watched me with concern—but fortunately not fear—as I gingerly placed Doomslug and Hesho on the table, sending Vice Admiral Lawkins scrambling out of her chair, mouth and eyes agape.

I smiled at Jorgen.

Then fainted into his arms.

—

I woke up with a splitting headache. I lay on the couch in the lounge beside the conference room—a room that Cobb had decorated in darker colors with some actual wooden furniture.

Jorgen hovered nearby. I groaned, trying to clear my mind from the very extended dream. I'd been...in a place where time didn't matter, and I'd been a *pirate*. I loved that specific dream; I had it all the time, and...

Oh. Wait.

"Spensa?" Jorgen asked, kneeling beside the couch. "Are you...feeling better?"

“Blaaaar,” I said. “My mouth feels like someone used it to dispose of rotting algae paste. Is there anything to drink?”

He smiled. Scud, it was a beautiful sight. I put a hand to my head and pulled it away to find it covered in white chalk. It was on the couch, and...

Yup. All of that happened.

“How long has it been since I left?” I asked him.

“About six weeks.”

Exactly what M-Bot’s chronometer had said in the nowhere. That was good, though I felt a pang of loss at the thought. How was I going to help him? How was I going to get him back?

Then something else occurred to me. Far less important, but more immediate. “Oh no,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut and putting the heels of my palms to them.

“What?” Jorgen asked.

“Did I really...*swoon*?”

He chuckled.

Oh, scud. I had. Me. Like some dainty woman wearing a corset.

“If you prefer,” he said, “think of yourself as a grand warrior hero stumbling home from the battlefield to her companions and collapsing from her wounds.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, opening my eyes. The red light was still flashing. “Um, is that because of me?”

He glanced at it. “Well, when you appeared out of nowhere, covered in white dust, wandering the halls like a ghost...it troubled some people.”

“They should expect that sort of thing from me.”

“Spensa,” he said, “your eyes were glowing white. Like...”

Like one of them.

Oh, scud. I kind of *was* one of them. I felt like me, mostly, but my soul had changed. Somehow melded with the delver that had been Chet. I could feel its experience and understanding attached to my own.

That...was kind of a big deal. Of the sort I really didn’t want to think through right now. How was I going to tell my boyfriend that half of me

was now an interdimensional eldritch abomination from outside time and space? At the very least, was there maybe a less silly way of wording that?

Or maybe there was something else more important to explain first. “Jorgen,” I said. “I did it. It was really hard, but I *did* it.”

“Did what, exactly?” he asked. “Got back to us?”

“More than that,” I said. “I found their secrets. I snuck...into the dragon’s den...and I scudding stole its golden cup.”

He grinned. “I have no idea what that means, but I like how much you sound like yourself when saying it.”

“It means that somewhere in my brain—and the things I can explain about the past of the delvers—is the solution to defeating them. They’re scared of me, Jorgen. More now than ever.”

“That’s good,” he said. “Because we’re in kind of a spot here...”

“What kind of spot?”

“I’ll explain,” he said, “but first I should go reassure everyone else that we’re not under a delver attack. Can you wait a little bit? We have a ton to talk about.”

“I can wait for the debriefing,” I said. “But not for the more important thing.”

“More important?” he said, then looked at me and seemed to get it. “Oh, uh, yes. I—”

I grabbed him by the neck and kissed him. I’d just hiked through an entire dimension. I wasn’t in the mood to be coy. He leaned into the kiss, and I felt as if my entire body came alight. With warmth. His warmth.

When we finally broke, he smiled widely. “I needed that,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re just lucky that you got me on the *one day* in that place when I had a shower.” I nodded toward the other room. “Go ahead. Deal with them. Then we’ll talk.”

There was still so much to do. A universe to save. For now though, I rested while Jorgen walked back toward the other room. From in there I heard a familiar voice, Hesho talking to the officials.

“So they moved on without me?” he was saying. “Kauri took over the ship! Why, I cannot express how proud I am of them. Yes...I see. I tried to help, but by doing that I was nevertheless impeding them. Human, you must tell my people that you have encountered one who calls himself the Masked Exile. They will know the reference from the ancient play. It is what I now am, and what I must be.”

Jorgen entered, and the officials listened to him as he calmed everyone down. Admirals a decade or more his senior accepted his words. As if...he really was in charge somehow. Guess I wasn't the only one who had some stories to tell. I idly glanced over my shoulder and found a monitor showing Detritus. It was in orbit around another planet.

Our planet was *orbiting another planet?*

That was new.

I felt a mind brush mine. Gran-Gran? She was curious, but happy to hear from me. And that other mind, smaller, was Doomslug. She was awake in the other room with Hesho.

Both expressed concern. I supposed they could see deep into me and knew the truth. That I'd been changed. Well, every journey changes the one who takes it. This one had done an extra-large job on me, but I still *felt* like myself, merely an enhanced version. A soul with a whole lot of extra code attached.

At least now I knew why the delvers had feared me so much. They hadn't merely been afraid of what I had been, or what I would learn. They'd been afraid of the future.

And of the thing they'd known I would become.

**Spensa will return in  
DEFIANT**

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Each and every book is a new challenge, and I keep learning new things about writing with each one. That said, getting this one ready on time was a little extra difficult, so I'm extremely proud to present it to you—and extra grateful to those who put the time in to help me.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BRANDON SANDERSON** is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Reckoners series: *Steelheart*, *Firefight*, *Calamity*, and the e-original *Mitosis*; the *New York Times* bestselling Skyward series: *Skyward*, *Starsight*, and *Cytonic*; the internationally bestselling Mistborn trilogy; and the Stormlight Archive. He was chosen to complete Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than thirty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Brandon lives and writes in Utah.

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# EVERSHORE

SKYWARD FLIGHT: NOVELLA THREE

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Books by Brandon Sanderson](#)

[Books by Janci Patterson](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*About the Authors\*](#)

For Darci Cole,  
who let me borrow her faith for a while

—JP



# Prologue

“Jorgen, are you ready?” my father asked, standing in the doorway to the parlor. He looked over my graduation uniform—admiring it I thought, but also searching for anything out of place.

“Yes,” I said. I stood in front of the glass case filled with my mother’s medals. She was one of the most decorated pilots the Defiant Defense Force had ever seen. At the center of the case was a pewter figure of a Sigo-class fighter—the ship my mother used to fly. As a kid I used to stand here and stare at that ship for hours, imagining what it would be like to be a pilot someday, fighting the Krell: all thrill and heroics and glory. I never took the figure out of the case—my mother would have killed me—but in my mind I flew in that ship to the stars and back.

I could see my reflection in the glass, my dress uniform crisp and fitted. After today, I’d be a full pilot.

“I hope you know how proud we are of you,” my father said. “So many cadets begin flight school, but graduating is a real accomplishment.”

My father was right. I’d started with what had to have been, in my estimation, the finest flight of pilots the DDF had ever seen. They were incredible people, every one of them. I couldn’t have asked for a better team.

And of all of us, only two remained. We’d lost some amazing people in the months of cadet training.

Rig, Bim, Morningtide, Nedder, Amphi, Quirk, Hurl.

Spin.

We needed them, but none of them were graduating today, and the DDF was poorer for it.

That didn’t feel like an accomplishment. It felt like a tragedy—one that was mostly on me. What worth was I? A leader who couldn’t bring his team

with him?

My mother came down the stairs in her own dress uniform. She wasn't officiating, but she'd still be there in all her regalia. She crossed the room to the case and opened it, pulling down her medals and pinning them on. She looked up at me, taking in my uniform, though it didn't feel like she was looking for imperfections the way it had with my father.

I felt like she was seeing herself.

"This is an important day," she said. "You've done every bit as well as we hoped you would."

"Thank you," I said—because it was the right answer, not because I felt it. I'd earned the pilot's pin more than I had the cadet's one—that had been automatic because of my mother's accomplishments. Still, I couldn't help wondering. Did I deserve to be here? Would Ironsides ever have kicked *me* out of cadet training? The son of Algernon and Jeshua Weight? I'd tried my best, done everything I knew how to do. But if I hadn't, I would probably still be standing here, my whole life laid out before me, predetermined just like my uniform.

"How does it feel to finally make full pilot?" my father asked.

This too had a right answer. "It feels great," I said. I glanced back at the now-empty medal stands and allowed myself this one admission: "Not that I'll be flying for long."

My mother's lips set into a line. "Thank the stars you won't have to."

I'd been told before I started flight school that I'd only fly active duty for six months. I should be grateful for that, but I wasn't. I wondered if FM would get to keep flying, or if our whole flight had been trained—using DDF resources, all the focus we'd put into it, the lives of my friends—for nothing.

I knew better than to say that aloud. I didn't need the lecture about how every sacrifice was part of a greater goal. I knew it by heart. I'd occasionally given it myself.

I could never say my mother didn't understand—she understood better than anyone. She was a decorated pilot. She'd lost friends, flightleaders, wingmates. I could see the heaviness in her eyes, the burden she carried.

She pushed on, doing everything she could for our people, because she believed in the cause—because we had to survive.

I was afraid I would never have the stomach for it, that I was soft and weak and would never be able to harden myself to do what needed to be done.

But if I was being honest with myself, I was equally afraid that I would.

# One

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

*Enough.*

I stood in the landing bay on Wandering Leaf, staring through the windows at the exploding Superiority ship as the wreckage spiraled out into the blackness of space. The eerie blue shield of Detritus loomed in the distance. My flight stood around me, all watching the remains of the explosion, the tomb that had claimed my parents and half of our National Assembly.

We were supposed to have saved them. We were supposed to have won. Instead we'd barely gotten ourselves out alive.

I could have died in there. I almost did. I should thank Alanik for pulling me out, but I felt frozen, like something inside of me had died after all.

"Did Gran-Gran—" Rig asked.

"She escaped," Alanik said. "So did Cobb. I saw them." I could feel her reaching out through the nowhere, searching for them. "But...I don't know where they are."

"At least they weren't here," FM said. She put a hand on my shoulder, but I shook her off.

"Boom," Boomslug said mournfully, looking at the wreckage. I didn't know what to do with his sympathy, let alone everyone else's. They were all staring at me, waiting to see what I was going to do. This was the moment a good commander should give an inspiring speech. Maintain morale. Treat this as a setback.

It wasn't a setback. It was a scudding *disaster*. I didn't have anything inspiring to say. I wasn't even sure how I was staying on my feet.

I had to though. They were all looking to me. Or *at* me. I couldn't really tell.

I wasn't going to fall apart. Not here, not where my entire flight could see.

Fragments of the ship spun out into space, while others careened toward the planet. One hit the shield around Detritus and bounced off.

In my mind, my mother looked directly at me.

*Do better than we did*, she said.

*Enough.*

In the distance, the Superiority station that monitored Detritus blinked out of existence, hyperjumping away.

They wouldn't even give us the dignity of revenge. They'd run like cowards. There was no one left for us to attack, just the terrible wreckage floating ever outward, a monument to our diplomatic failures.

"We're going down to Platform Prime," I said. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the others looking at each other, not sure what to make of that.

"Okay," FM said. "But I think you need to stop for a minute—"

*No.* I couldn't stop. This wasn't about me. It wasn't even about my parents. It was about what we were going to do for Detritus.

"*Now*," I said.

The UrDail were expecting us back to finalize our alliance. That was more important now than ever. The war went on, and we were losing badly. We had to get back on track, and the only way to do that was to find Admiral Cobb and return power to the DDF.

The assembly'd had their chance. We were looking at the remains of it.

"I'm sorry, Alanik," I said. "We'll be a little late returning to ReDawn. There are some things we need to take care of first."

"Jorgen," FM said, "I think you should sit down for a minute."

I *couldn't*. "Put Gill in the hyperdrive," I said to FM, mostly so she'd have to stop talking. "I'll give him instructions to take us into the airspace beneath Platform Prime."

FM hesitated long enough that I looked back at her.

It was a mistake. She was watching me with so much concern that I wanted to shout at her. Scream at the sky. Break things.

But I was the flightleader. It was my job to stay in control, at least until Cobb was back. He'd probably try to send me on leave then.

I'd tell him I didn't want to go. We needed every person to face what was coming. Maybe Cobb would see that. Maybe he'd let me stay.

"Do it, FM," Arturo said.

"Yeah, okay," she said. She headed to the control room, and Rig went with her.

I turned to Alanik. "I need to know where Cobb is," I said. "Where did Gran-Gran take them?"

"I don't know," Alanik said. "I'm looking for them, but I can't find them." I closed my eyes, reaching out toward the planet. It would make sense for Gran-Gran to take them somewhere beneath the surface—to her home maybe—but I couldn't sense her mind. Not on Platform Prime, not on the surface, not in the caverns below.

"Keep trying," I said. "Once you find Gran-Gran, we can go pick them up."

I strode toward my ship, turning my back on the glowing wreckage. I didn't need to see it again. The spiraling shape was already fixed in my mind, expanding outward forever.

"Boom," Boomslug said.

"Boom," I agreed with him.

"Jorgen," FM called. "We're ready."

I reached out to Gill, giving him a clear impression of the airspace below Platform Prime. Wandering Leaf was an abandoned battle platform with hyperdrive technology, and its autofire could tear other platforms to pieces, so we'd need to park it far enough down in the upper atmosphere that the other platforms would be out of range.

*Go*, I told him.

And then I floated beneath the vast starscape of white eyes. They didn't focus on me—we were invisible to them as long as we used the slugs to hyperjump. But I didn't like the eyes any better when they couldn't see me. I always felt as if they could see *through* me, like I was made of something

flimsy and superficial with nothing substantial underneath. This time though, I felt something different, something new.

I *hated* them.

It was irrational; they weren't the ones who'd spent the last eighty years raining down death on my people. They hadn't trapped my parents in a ship and blown the thing to pieces. I didn't know if they were responsible for these strange powers I had neither asked for nor wanted. As far as I knew, they weren't even responsible for taking Spensa away. She'd done that herself.

But I still couldn't smother the sudden startling feeling that at its core, everything bad that had happened to us was *all their fault*.

Wandering Leaf emerged far below the vast metal underside of Platform Prime, the current DDF headquarters. "Flight," I said, "take your ships up to the landing bay."

"What are you going to do?" Nedd asked.

The raw hatred I'd felt for the eyes was still hot in my veins. It felt *good*, better than the icy chill of shock or the raging terror of grief.

"I'm going to make sure no one else does anything stupid until Cobb gets back," I said. I climbed into my ship. I'd already given my orders to the flight, so I left my radio off.

"Cobb gets back," Snuggles said, settling on the floor of the cockpit by the side of my seat.

"Let's hope it happens soon," I said. And then I directed Snuggles to hyperjump my ship out of Wandering Leaf and up to the landing bay of Platform Prime.

The ground crew looked shocked when we appeared. They wouldn't have been able to see the explosion from here, not with the platforms forming the shield above them.

But word spread fast when half your government was annihilated.

I left the slugs in my ship as I disembarked. "We're under orders to arrest you for desertion," Dobsi, one of the ground crew members, said. She looked at me uncertainly, like she didn't want to be the one to carry out that particular arrest.

A good call on her part. “Admiral Cobb gave us orders to leave,” I said. “He’ll clear everything up when he returns.”

Dobsi hesitated. “Where did he go?”

“It’s classified,” I said. It wasn’t a great answer, but it was the only one I had.

My flight hyperjumped into the hangar, their ships all connected by light-lances. FM and Alanik jumped out first, and the ground crew looked suspiciously at Alanik like she might be the cause of all the trouble.

Alanik stared them down, but she did move quickly over to me. FM looked at me with that terrible sympathy in her eyes again.

Before she could open her mouth, I turned on my heels and headed toward the command center. There wasn’t time to stop, not now. I had to make sure that my flight wasn’t going to be scudding arrested. The assembly’s plan had blown up in all of our faces—literally.

We were going to do this Cobb’s way now, whether they liked it or not.

I walked in, Alanik and FM on my heels and the rest of the flight trailing behind, to find the command center in shambles. Cobb’s aides were all staring at monitors and talking over the radio to various DDF departments on the platform and on the ground. Commander Ulan and Ziming from Engineering were having an argument near the hypercomm, while Rikolfr from the admiral’s staff kept trying to page Cobb, but to no avail.

They couldn’t find him either. Without him, the explosion of the Superiority ship had sent the staff into disarray.

*Enough.*

“Admiral Cobb is alive,” I said loudly. Most of the room turned to look at me. “The person who’s been giving you orders since last night was a Superiority plant using a holographic disguise.”

*Not how I would have started,* Alanik said in my mind. *You don’t have proof of that, do you?*

“Anyone who doesn’t believe me,” I said, “is invited to find Cobb so he can confirm. He was kidnapped and taken to the Superiority ship.”

“The one that *blew up*?” Commander Ulan said.



“That’s the one,” I said. “He and Mrs. Becca Nightshade escaped together. They’ll be making their way here soon, and until they get here, *no one else* is going to do *anything stupid*. Do you think you can all handle that?”

“You’re back,” a voice said from behind me, and I turned to see Vice Admiral Stoff striding toward me. He was one of three vice admirals who served under Cobb. My flightmates stepped aside to let him pass. Rig followed behind him. He hadn’t had a ship, so he’d probably asked Drape to hyperjump him to the slugs’ home location in Engineering. “Flightleader Weight, you’re under arrest for—”

Not this again. I wasn’t going to sit in the brig and watch while more people I cared about got hurt.

“The charges were a sham,” I said. “Either they were issued by my mother—who didn’t have the authority—or they were given by the false Admiral Cobb, who was actually an alien wearing a hologram.”

Vice Admiral Stoff blinked at me. This was definitely not the attitude I was supposed to take with my superior officer. On a normal day, I would have been horrified with myself.

Today I had met my capacity to experience horror. I wasn’t looking forward to the moment it all caught up to me.

“An alien wearing a hologram,” Stoff repeated.

“Yes!” I said. “You know, the hologram the Superiority learned how to construct by disassembling the remains of Spensa’s starship—the one we *handed* to them?”

Stoff looked around the room, but no one spoke. “How do we know that’s true if Cobb’s no longer here?”

“It’s true,” Alanik said.

Stoff sighed. “We’ll take you to the debriefing room,” he allowed, like he was doing me a great service. “We can make a determination about the court-martial proceedings after—”

“No,” I said.

Stoff stared at me. “What was that?”

“No,” I said. “We have an alliance to formalize with the UrDail on ReDawn, and my flight and I are expected to be there.” Stars, I didn’t know how I was going to get through that kind of political meeting. I lacked diplomatic finesse at the best of times. Just look at how *this* was going.

“Flightleader,” Stoff said, “that alliance hasn’t been authorized by the assembly—”

“The *assembly* got blown to bits!” I said. “Do you have footage on the monitors? Should we replay it for you?”

“I’m aware,” Stoff said. “But you don’t have the authority to—”

Saints, if we were going to talk about authority, I could talk about authority. “Section 1809 of the DDF Command Protocol says that the chain of command can be temporarily interrupted in the event that the commanding officers are unaware of intelligence that would change their orders beyond reasonable doubt if they *were* aware.”

“In this case,” Stoff said, “there is no such intelligence.”

“You have been taking orders from a Superiority plant!” I shouted at him. “You couldn’t tell the difference between Admiral Cobb and the *alien* who took his place. And he wasn’t even *all that good at pretending*.”

Vice Admiral Stoff’s mouth opened like he wanted to defend himself, but then he shut it again.

“Meanwhile,” I said, “my flight and I have been off on *another planet* trying to secure an alliance so that *all of you* might live to see another day. Cobb ordered us to find allies, and we did. We have a military full of UrDail fighters ready to challenge the Superiority with us. Meanwhile, you all were trying to bargain with them. How did that turn out?”

Stoff stared at me with his mouth hanging open. I was only a flightleader, but because of my parents everyone in the DDF knew who I was. Despite the recent charges, I still had a reputation for being a rule follower. This outburst was the last thing he expected from me.

“You know what?” I said before he could respond. “Maybe we should call my mother and ask her.”

Stoff looked up at the ceiling. I waited for him to cuff me and take me to the brig, but instead he nodded. “We need to have that debriefing.”

“Stars, yes, we do,” I said. “But in the meantime, *no one* is doing *anything* until Admiral Cobb is back.”

“Technically, sir,” Rikolfr said, “Vice Admiral Stoff is in charge in Cobb’s absence—”

“He would be in command if Cobb was indisposed,” I said. “But Cobb *isn’t* indisposed. He will be back soon. And my flight and I are the last people to whom he gave orders and direction before he was kidnapped.” I didn’t technically know if that was true, but none of them could contradict me, given that they hadn’t even realized Cobb had been replaced. “If Cobb were here, he would agree with me because you people are a mess without him. If you want proof, *look* at what happened to the delegation you sent!”

“Fine,” Stoff said. “Until we can get all the information to the assembly —”

“No,” I said. “No more talking to the assembly.”

Stoff stuttered at me.

*You should point out that their peace deal turned out to be a sham, Alanik said in my head. They have no hope of securing an alliance with my people without you, and they desperately need one.*

*Good point,* I said to her. “All hope of securing a treaty with the Superiority is dead. Our only path forward is to ally ourselves with the other peoples the Superiority is trying to oppress. And you’re going to need cytonics for that. Unless the assembly has found a way to get themselves across the expanse of space without us.”

“We’ll see what Admiral Cobb has to say when he returns,” Stoff said, and then he spun and strode out of the room again, with the air of a man who had lost an argument but didn’t want to admit it.

I reminded myself to breathe. Stoff wasn’t going to let me get away with this forever. He was giving me some leeway because I had information he didn’t, and more because of what had happened to my parents.

“We need to find Cobb immediately,” I said, mostly to myself.

“Where is the admiral now?” Rikolfr asked.

I looked over to Alanik, and she shook her head. I couldn’t pull off telling this crowd it was classified. A lot of them had security clearance

higher than mine. “We don’t know exactly where he went, but he’ll be back soon.”

He’d better. There was only so long I’d be able to hold things together in his name before people started questioning why they should listen to me.

I was questioning it already.

“Sir?” Ashwin from the Communications Corps held a radio out to me. “National Assembly Leader Winter is on the radio. She wants to talk to you.”

To *me*? I wondered if any of what I’d just said had been broadcast over the radio. There were several people who’d been in the middle of conversations when I’d walked in, and it wasn’t a complicated procedure to switch from headset to ambient reception.

I wondered if NAL Winter wanted to yell at me for what I’d said to Stoff, or give her condolences about my parents.

Either way, I didn’t want to hear it. And while I had some things to say about what I thought of the assembly, none of them would be productive. “Take a message,” I said.

“Sir?” Ashwin said. “Under the circumstances—”

“Take. A. Message,” I said. “In detail. And then tell her that according to Section 57 of the DDF Communications Policy, the DDF has three days to respond.”

Ashwin blinked at me. “Three days, sir?”

“Yes,” I said. This fiasco had been the assembly’s idea. All of it. It was *their fault*, and I wasn’t going to listen to a word they had to say even one second before I had to. “And then make yourself a memo to remind us two days and twenty-three and a half hours from now that we need to draft a response. Or better yet, make a note to tell *Cobb* to do it, because *he* will be back by then. Is that clear?”

“Um, yes, sir,” Ashwin said.

“Good.”

I turned around and found FM watching me nervously. “Are you going to tell me I should talk to the assembly?” I asked.

“No way,” FM said. “Not a chance. You’re absolutely right. That disaster was their fault. Being made to wait is the least of what they deserve. But Jorgen, you need to talk about what happened—”

“You want to talk about something?” I said to FM. “Let’s talk about how we’re going to find Cobb.”

We both looked at Alanik, who held up her hands. “I’m trying,” she said. “It’s a big universe, Jorgen, and I don’t know where Gran-Gran tried to take them.”

“She’d never been off this planet, had she?” FM asked. “Where else would she go?”

“She was born on the *Defiant*,” Rig said. “She used to travel the stars as a little girl, but she said she didn’t remember much about it. I can’t imagine she’d try to take them anywhere else.”

“They aren’t here,” Alanik said. “I’m sure of that.”

FM looked to me for confirmation. I closed my eyes, reaching down beneath the surface of the planet again. There were more slugs down there—I could feel their vibrations.

But no cytonic people, and definitely no Gran-Gran.

“I think she’s right,” I said. “But Spensa managed to contact me from the *nowhere*. If she could do that, we should be able to find Gran-Gran wherever she is, right?”

“I’ll keep trying,” Alanik said.

Arturo stood behind her in the doorway. “Come on,” he said. “I’ll find you someplace quiet where you can concentrate.”

Alanik nodded and turned to follow Arturo out.

I was being too hard on her, probably. It wasn’t her fault Cobb disappeared.

I’d apologize after we found him.

“Jorgen,” FM said. I knew what she was going to say. She’d said it several times.

“What I need,” I said, “is to find Cobb. Are any of the slugs familiar enough with the admiral to hyperjump to him?”

“I don’t know,” FM said. “We haven’t tried to get them to recognize him, but some of them might...” She looked like she was going to go back to arguing that I should sit down and stop for a minute, but I didn’t want to stop. I was outrunning the storm right now, and I was going to keep running as long as I could.

“Find out,” I said. “Get Rig on it too.” I turned and strode down the hall into Cobb’s office, closing the door behind me.

I didn’t know what to say to any of them, not about what happened, not about what had to happen now. Cobb would know what to do with all of this.

But he wasn’t the one I missed most at the moment. In my mind, I watched the Superiority ship explode over and over again. Some of that image must have leaked into the nowhere, because Snuggles and Boomslug appeared on my shoulders, and Boomslug slid down my arm into the crook of my elbow and softly trilled, “Boom.”

“Can you find Cobb?” I asked Snuggles.

She responded by nuzzling my ear, but she didn’t take us anywhere. I pressed my back against the door, closing my eyes.

More than anything, I wished Spensa were here.

## Two

Two days later, we still hadn't heard a word from Cobb. Alanik tried her best, but no matter where she looked she couldn't find Gran-Gran. They'd simply disappeared, she said.

At this point, I was the only cytonic from Detritus who *hadn't* mysteriously disappeared. Spensa was stuck in the nowhere, but she'd at least managed to get in contact with me twice. It had been several days now, and I was anxious to hear from her again.

But from Cobb and Gran-Gran, there was only silence.

I sat at a conference table with Alanik, FM, and Minister Cuna, the dissenter Superiority bureaucrat. Boomslug and Snuggles snuffled around under my chair like they expected someone to have spilled some caviar down there, though the floor was swept twice a day as per Mandate 27 of the Facilities Regulations. Alanik had just returned from ReDawn with half the flight—I'd sent Arturo, Nedd, and Kimmalyn to finish solidifying the alliance.

"Rinakin is prepared to send a flight of ships to Detritus as a symbolic gesture," Alanik said. "And more, certainly, if there's a need for them here."

I struggled to focus on what she was saying. I'd barely been sleeping—every time I closed my eyes, that ship exploded in the darkness. In my dreams, I watched my mother mouth those words at me through the glass: *Do better than we did*. The ship tore to pieces before my eyes, sometimes while I watched from the platform—sometimes with me still inside it, somehow conscious of everything as it shredded me.

In the very worst nightmares, it was Spensa on the other side of the glass.

"ReDawn is more vulnerable," I said. "We have the planetary shield to protect us. We should be sending flights to defend *you*."

"The taynix will help with that," FM said.

We'd given Rinakin a single taynix of each type, and we already had people from the ground crews scouring the caverns of Detritus for more. We'd lost many in the trap set by the Superiority, and we were going to need all the hyperdrives we could find in the coming days.

"Do you think Stoff will let us take flights to ReDawn if the Superiority attacks again?" FM asked.

"Maybe," I said. I'd stayed behind while the others went to ReDawn, because I'd wanted to be here to keep an eye on things until we found Cobb. "He's been weirdly receptive to my suggestions."

"Do you think it's because he agrees with you?" FM asked. "Or because he sees an opportunity to escape blame if all this goes wrong?"

"It's the second," I said. Once Stoff got over the idea of me challenging him, he'd become almost *too* accommodating. If things went well, I fully expected him to take credit for all of it. If we crashed and burned, he was going to pin it all on me. "But I don't think Cobb is going to reprimand me for trying to protect our people in his absence."

FM looked concerned. She was still doing that a lot in my direction. She'd mostly stopped trying to corner me to get me to talk, which was good. I didn't need to talk. I needed to stay focused, move forward. My refusal to let her talk to me also meant we still hadn't addressed the fight we'd had on ReDawn. Her words still rang in my mind: *You're not my flightleader.*

I understood why she'd said that—she'd been rightly worried about the taynix being turned over to the Superiority—but it still stung. We were all trained to follow orders, to do as we were told. How bad must I be at this if a member of my own team—and a friend, I'd thought—could disavow me so easily?

"Winzik will not take the defeat on ReDawn well," Cuna said. "Detritus might be the more difficult target, but he will only see that as a challenge to his authority. He is probably mobilizing more ships even now. He will gather enough force to break through Detritus's shield eventually, even with the cytonic inhibitor in place."



That was true, but I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't think Stoff did either. "We need to find Cobb," I said. "He'll know what to do."

FM looked doubtful about that, but she didn't voice it.

"About Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade," Cuna said. A pin on their collar translated their words, which were spoken in an alien language. "If Mrs. Nightshade merely took them to another room on the Superiority ship, they might still have been caught in the explosion."

"No," Alanik said. "I scanned the ship after they left, and there weren't any cytonics on it except for me and Jorgen."

"It's possible they were in an accident returning to the planet," Cuna said. "If they hyperjumped into a dangerous position, they might have been killed on return. That would explain your inability to find them, would it not?"

"Don't say that," I said. "They aren't dead."

Alanik and FM exchanged a look.

"We have no *evidence* that they are dead," I corrected myself. "We aren't going to assume that they are without evidence."

"Stoff isn't going to hold off on replacing Cobb forever," FM said. "Even if he thinks he can use you as a scapegoat, at some point they're going to need to name a new admiral. They're only taking your word for it that Cobb didn't die on that ship."

Alanik looked personally offended. "We are witnesses, so taking our word for it makes perfect sense."

"Maybe," I said. "But FM is right. They aren't going to let this go on forever." It wouldn't necessarily be Stoff who took Cobb's place—there were two other vice admirals of equal rank, though they were both planetside at the moment, trying to deal with the fallout of the Superiority broadcasting the deaths of half the assembly to the citizens of Detritus.

I didn't think Stoff wanted control of the DDF, or he would have seen Cobb's absence as an opportunity instead of a burden he was mostly trying to shift to me. "I'm not sure what options we have though," I said. "Our military is too small and ill-equipped to take on the Superiority once they get their forces mustered. The UrDail pilots are well trained but

inexperienced, and the Superiority's technology outpaces us all. And that's assuming they don't try to send another delver after us. Spensa said the Superiority was trying to make a deal with them."

"We need to continue to reach out and form other alliances," Cuna said. "There will be many peoples who don't approve of Winzik's methods."

I wasn't sure that Cuna entirely approved of *our* methods. They still seemed to find us aggressive and barbaric, even though our tactics had saved them from capture on Sunreach.

"It may be only lesser species in the beginning," they continued. "But as time goes on, I'm sure the more advanced species will also begin to turn on Winzik."

"Those *lesser species* saved your life," Alanik muttered.

"Twice now," FM added under her breath.

"Of course!" Cuna said, as if this didn't contradict what they'd said previously at all. "All species have something wonderful to add to the Superiority—"

"This isn't the Superiority," I said. "We're not trying to join them." Cuna wanted us to see the Superiority as a diverse group of peoples, and I'm sure they were, given the thousands of planets that were apparently under their control. But. "The Superiority has been killing our people since long before Winzik took over, and we're not making an alliance with any part of it. Not again."

Cuna looked like they might argue, but I wasn't going to hear it. Alanik had been right about the Superiority. My parents had tried to reason with them, and look where that got them.

"Boom," Boomslug muttered from down by my feet, where he'd curled around the leg of my chair.

I reached for him and scritchd him between his spines. He nuzzled his body against my hand.

"Cobb ordered us to find allies though," I said, before Cuna could make any more defenses of the Superiority. "So if we reach out to others, we're still following his orders."

"Technically," FM said, "he ordered us to make allies of the UrDail."

“Technically they weren’t orders at all,” Alanik added. “They were not-orders.”

“That’s beside the point,” I insisted. “If we’re making alliances, then we’re doing what Cobb would do. And if our superior officers know we’re doing it, and they don’t order us not to, then we’re still operating within the current chain of command.”

“Do you know anyone we can reach out to with the hypercomm?” FM asked Cuna. “Other species we could make an alliance with?”

Cuna shook their head, laying their hands flat on the conference table. “I have tried to reach my contacts, but some have gone underground. Others might side with Winzik, so I have to be careful whom I reach out to. Your hypercomm does not have the data banks that mine did, and without the coordinates to reach the others—”

“We don’t know their radio frequencies, basically,” I said.

“Precisely,” Cuna said. “I have allies among the figments, if we can reach them.”

“We might be able to do that cytonically,” Alanik said. “Though if we try to reach out to the wrong people, we might set ourselves up to walk into another Superiority trap.”

I nodded. We couldn’t approach other cytonics indiscriminately. “You can monitor hypercommunication though, can’t you?” I asked Alanik. I hadn’t been able to figure out how to do that yet, but Alanik seemed to do it easily. “You could see if you can find any anti-Superiority communication, and we could try to pinpoint the frequencies of the people who are sending them and contact them as potential allies.”

“Most of those who oppose Winzik won’t be using hypercomms,” Cuna said. “The lesser species don’t have access to them, and those who do will be afraid of being overheard.”

Alanik looked like she might punch Cuna if they called her “lesser” one more time.

“If it’s the only idea we have,” FM said, “then it’s still worth a try.”

“I agree,” I said. “And we don’t have to ask Stoff for resources to try it, so that’s even better.” I turned to Alanik. “I’d like to help canvass for

hypersignals,” I said. “You’ll have to teach me, but I’ve caught on quicker to the communication skills than hyperjumping.”

“Of course,” Alanik said. “I’d be happy to have your assistance.”

I hoped I would *be* of assistance, but we were getting desperate, and until we found Gran-Gran I was the only other cytonic we had.

Rig knocked on the doorframe to the conference room. His yellow hyperslug, Drape, peered over his shoulder from his perch in one of the new backpacks Engineering had devised. A boomslug—as everyone had begun calling them, even though technically it was Boomslug’s name—peered over his other shoulder.

“Are you carrying one of those around now?” I asked. That was strange. We’d mostly left the boomslugs alone, except for Boomslug. Everyone else was too worried about triggering the mindblades.

Rig shrugged, and the slugs bobbed along with the gesture. “Boomslug saved my life back on Wandering Leaf, so I thought we should try to keep more of these guys around. For purely experimental purposes, of course. I’m definitely not carrying a slug as a bodyguard.”

I couldn’t blame him if he was.

FM smiled at Rig. The two of them were scudding adorable, which lately made me want to punch things. Spensa’s influence, probably. “He named this one Squeeze.”

Of course. FM had taken glee in naming my hyperslug Snuggles before she assigned her to me. If I hadn’t already bonded with Boomslug, they no doubt would have tried to push Squeeze on me as well.

Cobb would tell me I should have more of a sense of humor about myself. He was usually right.

“Did you need something?” I asked Rig.

“Just wondering if FM was available to run drills with the slugs,” he said. “We’ve got Stardragon Flight ready to practice with the new keywords.”

The other flights had been less than thrilled when FM stole some of their taynix, but she was largely forgiven now that the assembly had lost most of the other taynix to the Superiority. We hadn’t secured enough new slugs to

outfit all the flights yet, and any new ones we found in the caverns would have to start their training from scratch.

Which meant I shouldn't keep them from it. If she was busy, FM had less time to worry in my general direction. "Yeah, we're done here," I said. "How is the platform exploration going?"

"The team is still working on it," Rig said. They were looking for more platform control rooms like the one on Wandering Leaf. It was similar enough to the platforms on Detritus that it seemed likely we might have some with similar capabilities. More platforms that could hyperjump or fire hyperweapons would be a valuable asset. "There is a lot of junk in the debris belt, and a lot of platforms to search."

"I understand," I said. "Let me know if you find anything."

"Will do," Rig said as FM pushed her chair away from the table and moved to join him. Rig didn't report to me officially, but we were all in a holding pattern until Cobb returned, so sharing information only made sense.

"Are you ready to look for signals now?" I asked Alanik.

"Yes," she said. "But not here. These chairs are too square. It's distracting."

I didn't have a chance to ask what she meant, because Alanik had already stood up from her...*square* chair and marched out of the conference room.

I scooped up Snuggles and Boomslug and followed Alanik, as she seemed to know where she was going. I hoped I'd be able to help. I had to do *something*, because if I didn't, the tragedies we'd suffered would only be the beginning.

## Three

Alanik brought me to one of the small meeting rooms. At the head of the square table sat the weirdest chair I had ever seen. It looked as if it was made entirely from tree branches, sanded and polished and warped into twisting shapes that stretched up the back in a spiraling pattern. As I got closer I could see that it was a continuous carving from a single large piece of wood.

“Did you *bring* that here?” I asked.

“Yes,” Alanik said. “It was Arturo’s suggestion. I was saying that I find your furniture strangely square, and he said that if I was going to spend hours searching for Gran-Gran and Cobb in the negative realm, I might as well bring myself back a comfortable place to sit. It’s my favorite from my own home.”

The seat was polished wood rather than a cushion, and Alanik folded herself onto it with her legs tucked under her.

There was another chair in here—which did look squarish beside hers, but it had cushions covered in a plain brown fabric, and looked much more comfortable to me. I wondered if Arturo had been using it. They seemed to be spending a lot of time together.

I sank into the chair. “I don’t know if I’m going to be any help at this.”

“If you’re willing to try,” Alanik said, “it can’t hurt.”

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. As I reached out with my cytonic senses, I could feel Alanik on the chair beside me, and Boomslug and Snuggles settling on my lap. I widened my focus and found the other slugs across the platform, and—dimly—the vibrations that indicated there were still more taynix down on the planet that we hadn’t been able to locate.

I should probably be down there looking for them myself, since I could sense them and the ground crews couldn’t. Maybe Cobb would use that as

an excuse to send me away for a while once he returned. It would be better than bereavement leave. At least I'd have something to focus on, something to *do*.

"Okay," Alanik said. "We're going to reach away from Detritus. The universe is like a giant map, and we can examine places up close or at a distance. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not really," I said. "I can focus in on one person's mind, or sense the cytonic...vibration of a group. But I don't see locations, only people."

"People!" Snuggles announced. I thought she liked being included.

"Hmm," Alanik said. "This is why you have a hard time hyperjumping, probably."

"I can visualize a physical place in my mind," I said. "Like I can imagine the trees of ReDawn, because I've seen them, and send that picture to Snuggles."

"Snuggles," Boomslug said affectionately.

"Forget about the places then," Alanik said. "I think our experience of them is different. Instead, try reaching for people, but instead of looking for them, *listen*."

That sounded just as nonsensical, but at least it didn't require me to look for things I couldn't see.

"When you say 'listen,' do you mean for things you hear? Or the way Spensa heard the stars, the way I heard the slugs. Like, the vibration of the universe?"

"Neither," Alanik said. "Like when I speak in your mind. Listen for the voices of others. You can intercept their communications, whether it's hypercomm or mind-to-mind. It all passes through the negative realm, and if you are passing through it at the same time..."

Okay. That made sense. "Thank you for explaining," I said. "When Gran-Gran taught me this stuff, she mostly made me knead bread and told me to listen to the stars. It helped, weirdly, but it wasn't exactly intuitive."

"That's not as bad a tactic as you might think," Alanik said. "My training was similar. I can try to explain things to you, but in the end your intuition is the only way you will learn."

I hated that. I liked things that could be explained, preferably with proven pedagogical techniques, written reference materials, and lots of concrete examples. Cytonics was the opposite of that in every way, and I couldn't help but feel that whatever force was handing these powers out had given them to the wrong person when they picked me.

Spensa seized her powers and made use of them. I was floundering around in the dark.

Beside me I could feel Alanik's mind as she expanded her senses, reaching out into the void. I tried to do the same, at first looking for other minds, then listening for voices.

I wondered if I could find Spensa that way, the way she'd reached out to me from the nowhere. My mind was passing through it, and if she was in there it made sense that I would be able to find her again. I hoped every day, and even more since the explosion, that I'd hear from her. I wanted evidence she was all right, news that she was finding a way to return.

But more than anything, I desperately wanted to hear her voice again.

I expanded my mind, listening.

And then, just barely, I heard a snatch of something. A voice in the nothingness. —*solar flares on the—avoid the area—*

"I heard something!" I said. "Something about a solar flare."

"It's a weather report," Alanik said. "I found that one. It's a Superiority broadcast among their hyperjumping ships, warning them about hazards as they navigate the galaxy."

Of course Alanik had already heard it. But that didn't change the fact that *I'd* found it. I'd given up hope that I would be able to hyperjump, but Alanik said every cytonic should technically have access to all cytonic powers, even if various ones could be harder for some than for others.

Maybe I wasn't completely hopeless. Maybe I could still master this, or at least gain some passable skills.

I continued listening. The sounds were tiny blips in a vast area, like a taynix hiding among all the caverns of Detritus. I found another broadcast giving what sounded like navigational coordinates, and a ship captain complaining about some of his subordinates to his commander. These were



all hypercomm signals—they didn't originate in the nowhere. But if Spensa was in here, there had to be a way to reach her. *Spensa*, I thought. *Are you there? Can you hear me?*

"Stop that," Alanik said. "You're drowning everything else out."

My face flushed. Oh. Right. Of course Alanik could hear that. She was sitting right next to me, literally searching for cytonic signals.

*I can hear all of that too*, Alanik said. *It would be wonderful if we could find Spensa in here and find a way to bring her home, but perhaps we could focus on one matter at a time?*

"Of course," I said. "Sorry."

I sat and listened to the echoing void of the universe, trying not to radiate any thoughts that would overpower Alanik's search. I still wished I could search for Spensa, instead of combing through mundane hypercomm communications on the off chance someone might be sending anti-Superiority messages through the nowhere. The more I thought about this, the more it seemed like the odds of finding such a communication at the precise moment it was being sent would be one in a million. And it was frustrating to hear the Superiority using this technology like it was basic radio—they had made hypercommunication part of their civilization, while the rest of us were only now clawing our way out of the dark ages.

Spensa would be angry about that. She probably *was* angry about it. I wished she were here; she'd be better at this than I was. Spensa would probably—

*Spensa!*

I opened my eyes, blinking rapidly. That hadn't been Alanik's voice, or the slugs'.

Had I imagined it? After everything that had happened, was I losing my mind?

I reached out again, focusing on the voice. —*please respond*.

And then it started again. *Spensa, human of Detritus—*

"I found something," I said.

*Where?* Alanik asked. I could feel her mind reaching out for mine, following me into the nothingness.

—*return them! Please*—

“I hear it,” Alanik said. She focused on the words as they repeated again—it was an ongoing signal being broadcast on a loop. As we listened, the words became more and more clear.

*Spensa, human of Detritus! the message said. This is the Swims Upstream! We have your humans and would like to return them! Please respond.*

“They have our humans and would like to *return* them?” I said.

“That’s what they said.” Alanik frowned. “Do they mean Cobb and Gran-Gran?”

“Or other humans,” I said. “We don’t know if there are other prison planets like ours, or if we’re the only ones left.”

“If they found an entire planet of humans, would they really be contacting Spensa to *return* them?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what ‘*Swims Upstream*’ is. I don’t have any idea who’s trying to reach us.” The Superiority knew about Spensa, and that she was connected to our planet. They knew she’d disappeared, and they were no doubt trying to find her. This might be an attempt to bait her into the open, the way they did to my parents.

I supposed there was some comfort in knowing that if she was stuck in the nowhere, she couldn’t fall into that trap.

“I can pinpoint the coordinates,” Alanik said. “I could give them to the taynix in your hypercomm, so you could respond.”

“*Should* we respond?” I asked.

“It’s a lead,” Alanik said. “The only one we have. And if they do have Cobb and Gran-Gran...”

I reached out for the message, listening to it play again. “Can you teach me how to pinpoint the message?” I asked. “Can we respond directly?”

“You said you weren’t sure you should respond. Don’t you want to run this by your commanders? I thought that was your answer for everything.”

Alanik had me figured out. “Yes,” I said. “But I want to know what’s possible. These are skills I need to learn, even if I don’t know if we should answer this particular message.”

“Listen then,” Alanik said. “You know how you can tell which mind is mine in the negative realm? You don’t try to speak to me and accidentally reach the taynix. You can even tell the individual slugs apart, can’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “At first I got them confused, but now I can tell one from another, as long as I’m familiar with them.”

“Places are like that too. They each have their own individual...feeling. And even if you can’t see the whole of the universe, you should be able to recognize the difference in sensation.”

“Like the vibrations,” I said. And...now that she said it, I *did* feel a distinct vibration coming from the message.

Could I use that to communicate with it? Could I speak to the recording as if it were a person? “If I tried to talk to it, would anyone hear me?” I asked. “It’s a hypercomm, not another cytonic.”

“It depends on whether there’s a person listening on the other end,” Alanik said. “But you could try.”

She was right that we should loop Stoff in on this. I wanted to keep an eye on things, make sure no one came up with any new terrible ideas in Cobb’s absence. But I couldn’t leave either the DDF or the National Assembly in the dark completely. I might be stretching the limits of my authority lately, but if I started keeping secrets from my superiors I’d be breaking them entirely.

Still, none of them were cytonics. Even if I looped in Stoff, Alanik and I would still be the only ones who could communicate with these people.

I focused on the vibration of the recording, trying to treat it as if it were the mind of another cytonic, or one of the taynix. *Can you hear me?* I asked.

The recording stopped abruptly, right in the middle of a sentence.

*Hello?* a voice said on the other end.

Scud. They’d heard me. The voice felt different than a full cytonic mind, but I was able to target the vibration.

*Is this the human planet Detritus?*

If I told them they’d reached us, would that give anything away? The Superiority already knew where we were. *It is*, I said, but I left it at that.

The message changed. *Human!* it said. *This is Kauri of the kitsen, captain of the Swims Upstream! Can you put me in touch with Spensa?*

“Interesting,” Alanik said.

“What’s interesting?” I asked.

“That they’re a kitsen,” she said. “Or they claim to be one. They’re another of the species the Superiority believes to be *lesser*. They’re small furry creatures, not unlike tree squirrels, but they’re as intelligent as UrDail. I’ve never met one, but I’ve seen a picture. They look...adorable.”

So I was either talking to a Superiority trap, or a tree squirrel that knew Spensa. I wasn’t sure which was more disturbing. “Okay,” I said. “You’re right that we should bring this to the attention of Command. This is too sensitive to handle on our own. We need to go to the comms people with this, and let Stoff know.”

“If you’re sure that’s wise,” Alanik said.

I wasn’t sure it was, but I also wasn’t ready to strike out entirely on my own. I was merely watching over the DDF for Cobb until we could find him.

*Let me speak with my superiors and get back to you,* I said.

*We eagerly await your return!* the voice said.

“If they *are* a squirrel, they’re a very enthusiastic one,” Alanik said.

“True.” I focused one more time on the vibration of the transmission. Alanik said she could give it to Fine in the hypercomm, but I wanted to learn to do this too. I waited until the vibration felt familiar, the way I could find Alanik’s mind quickly now that I knew her. And then I pulled my mind back to Detritus, where I could feel the buzz of the taynix all around, and then toward the room where I could feel Alanik sitting next to me.

As I drew inward, passing by the minds of the taynix on the platform, the area around me suddenly felt...denser. *Bumpier*, like it was filled with a hundred raised ridges in the otherwise empty space. They were there, and then as I focused on them, spontaneously absent.

“Did you feel that?” I asked.

“Feel what?” Alanik said.

“That...texture. Like there was suddenly something else in the nowhere with us.”

“Something *in* the nowhere? Like the eyes?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. Scud, I *hoped* what I’d felt wasn’t some sign of an impending delver attack. “Maybe it wasn’t *in* the nowhere exactly. More like I could feel something *through* the nowhere, all around us. Not more cytonics, but—”

Alanik stared at me, shaking her head. “I didn’t notice anything. I don’t feel anything here but you and the slugs.”

“Maybe I imagined it then.” The idea that I was losing my mind was somehow less scary than the thought of some *other* new thing emerging from the nowhere to haunt us. “I need to talk to Cuna and Stoff, to figure out what we’re going to do next. If the kitsen are really reaching out to us, we have to follow up on it.”

Whatever Stoff’s motives, I hoped he continued to be accommodating.

## Four

Alanik followed me up to talk to Stoff, and I didn't stop her. Stoff had the entire DDF behind him, and I wanted a little strength in numbers of my own. I would have called in the whole flight if I'd thought it would help.

Stoff was sitting in his office—he'd left the admiral's office empty in Cobb's absence, which I took as another sign he wasn't looking to usurp Cobb's position.

"We've found a transmission from a hypercomm, sir," I said. "Someone called Kauri looking for Spensa."

"Is it the Superiority?" Stoff asked.

"It could be," I said. "But they claim to be a kitsen. We have the coordinates for the message, so we can try to reach whoever it is by hypercomm. The message said they have our humans and they'd like to return them. It could be Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade, but we don't know for sure."

"Thank you," Stoff said. "If you get the hypercomm set up, I'll speak with them."

"I'd like to talk to them, sir," I said. "Alanik and I made the initial contact, and if they really are a kitsen, that might be another group we could approach about an alliance. Cobb put us in charge of making alliances, so we should have the clearance to do so."

I knew that was a stretch, but I tried not to show it. Stoff sighed and gave me an appraising look. I was pretty sure he was weighing how much rope he could give me to hang myself without looking like he was part of the problem when Cobb returned.

But there wouldn't *be* a problem when Cobb returned, because we were doing what Cobb wanted in the first place.

"All right," he said. "Your team has the most experience dealing with aliens, so you may take point."

Alanik raised an eyebrow at him. I didn't think she appreciated our efforts with her people being reduced to "dealing with aliens," but at least he hadn't called them lesser.

"I'd like to brief Cuna on the interaction as well," I said. "They might have some insight about who we're dealing with."

"Agreed," Stoff said. "I'll call the team to the command room in thirty minutes."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

Stoff nodded. I was dismissed.

I found Cuna sitting in their living quarters with the other diones we'd rescued from Sunreach. "We've intercepted a message from someone looking for Spensa," I said. "They claim to be a kitsen named Kauri."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Cuna said. "The kitsen are among the most advanced of the lesser species when it comes to their nonaggression. It's their outdated monarchy that has kept them from ascending to full citizenship."

"I'm not sure if this really *is* a kitsen," I said. "I'm concerned it might be a ploy—Winzik or his people trying to capture Spensa by pretending to be her allies."

"Spensa worked with a group of kitsen when she was training on Starsight," Cuna said. "So the claim is plausible! I interacted mostly with Hesho, their former monarch. His people could be powerful allies. They've had a long military history to overcome as they've worked to be ready for inclusion among the higher species."

I stared at Cuna. "*Our* people have a long military history," I said. "And that's the only reason we were able to rescue you from Winzik in the first place."

"Twice," Alanik said.

"Of course," Cuna said, though I wasn't sure they'd understood my point. "And your people have a distant connection with the kitsen. They have some of the best records of cytonic history, despite having produced no cytonics for centuries."

“We’re going to talk to them over the hypercomm in a few minutes, if you’d like to join us. I need to make sure the hypercomm is ready.”

“I would love to join you,” Cuna said.

“Thank you,” I said, and went off to get Fine into the hypercomm.

Stoff only invited a small number of people to the meeting. He and three people from the Communications Corps sat around the conference table. Cuna and Alanik entered and took two of the remaining chairs while I used the frequency impression I’d learned earlier to ask Fine to open communication with Kauri.

I spoke into the hypercomm’s microphone. “Kauri,” I said experimentally. “Can you hear me?”

“Human,” the voice said. “We are trying to reach Spensa, who once called herself by the name Alanik. Do you know where we might find her?”

“Spensa is away on a mission,” I said. It was true, even if it wasn’t complete. “We would like to speak to you though. What did you mean when you said you had our humans?”

“Two humans hyperjumped to our planet a few days ago,” the voice said. “We believe they might have arrived here by accident. We would have contacted you sooner, but we had to commandeer a hypercomm to do so.”

“You stole a Superiority hypercomm?” I asked.

“We did!”

“Kitsen are known for their bravery,” Cuna said. “It is a good quality, if it can be divorced from violence.”

I was certain violence was going to be necessary before all this was over, so I didn’t see that as a downside.

Alanik opened her eyes. “I’m searching the area near their broadcast point, but I’m not able to find Becca Nightshade. I don’t think she’s there.”

Kauri could be lying. Or these humans might have nothing to do with us. “Kauri,” I said. “What method did the humans use to hyperjump to your planet?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I assume one of them is a cytonic.”

Alanik shook her head, speaking quietly so the microphone wouldn’t pick her up. “I’m not sensing any cytonics in that area.”



“Would you be able to tell from this distance?” Stoff asked.

“Yes,” Alanik said, in a tone that said she didn’t like being questioned by someone who had no idea what they were talking about. “I have used the location of the hypercomm signal to pinpoint the area. I am quite reliable, especially when it comes to reaching a cytonic I’m familiar with.”

“If one of them is a cytonic,” I said, “they should be able to reach out to us, shouldn’t they? Why would you need to steal a hypercomm?”

“Well,” Kauri said, “something must have gone wrong during the hyperjump. Your humans are unconscious.”

I looked at Alanik, and she shook her head. She should still be able to sense an unconscious cytonic.

“If your cytonic died on arrival,” Cuna said, “you would no longer be able to sense her. Hyperjumps can be dangerous, and—”

“Are you certain they’re alive?” I asked Kauri.

“Yes,” Kauri said. “They are breathing, and their bodies are warm. We are not experts in human health, but we believe this means they are living.”

Two living humans could be anyone, from anywhere. “Can you describe the humans to me?” I asked.

“One of them is quite wrinkly,” Kauri said. “The male’s body is rather mottled and purple.”

“He’s purple?” I asked.

“Cobb was injured,” Alanik said. “When I saw him on the Superiority ship, he looked like he’d been in a fight.”

“Yes. The large gentleman with the hairy face has some wounds we’re trying to attend to, but we don’t know much about human physiology.”

“I still need someone to explain that lip hair to me,” Alanik said. “It seems problematic.”

“We would like to return your humans to you for medical attention!” Kauri said. “We have been to the location of your planet, but we don’t have a hyperdrive to reach you! We were able to stow away on a carrier ship to return home from Starsight, but stealing a ship of that size is beyond our abilities. Do *you* have access to a hyperdrive?”

Alanik and I exchanged a look. Winzik already *knew* we had hyperdrives, so giving that away wouldn't be terrible.

"We have transportation," I said.

"That is most fortuitous!" Kauri said. "We look forward to making your acquaintance. Though Spensa deceived us, we found her to be a most honorable and formidable warrior, and we look forward to meeting with her peers, if indeed she has any."

I wasn't sure if I should be offended by that or not.

"Are we going to go?" Alanik asked quietly. "I still think it's suspicious that I can't find Gran-Gran on their planet."

I hesitated. We hadn't said we would go, but if they had Gran-Gran and Cobb, we had to do everything in our power to retrieve them. It was a risk, but without taking risks we'd never be able to find more allies.

I muted the microphone. "Sir," I said to Stoff, "I would like to send a small group to investigate. If we control the destination of our hyperjump, we should be able to scan the area for Superiority presence before we're spotted. According to Section 14 of the DDF Statutes on Prisoners of War, if a commander is missing behind enemy lines, it should be considered an implied order to rescue that commander if it does not directly interfere with the current mission. In this case, I'd say the section applies."

"I agree," Stoff said. "I think you should accompany your flight and investigate the situation."

I blinked at him. I wanted to go—I never wanted to send my flight anywhere without me. Even staying behind when they returned to ReDawn had been difficult.

Stoff knew that. Did he want me to go because he knew I was watching him? Alanik and I were the DDF's only cytonics. They needed us, so they should be reticent to send us both away at once.

But old prejudices ran deep. They were still *afraid* of us. So sending us away on a mission—one they could either take credit for if it was a success or scapegoat us for if it was a failure—probably seemed like a convenient excuse to get us out of the way.

If it meant we'd get Cobb back though, it worked in our favor.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I’ll get my team ready.”

Stoff nodded. “Better tell them you’re coming, then.”

“I think it would be better if we don’t,” I said. “If it is a trap, they’ll have less time to prepare.”

“All right,” Stoff said. “But you’ll want to hurry. If Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade need medical attention, we’ll want to get it to them sooner rather than later.”

“Agreed.” I unmuted the microphone. “We will try to make arrangements to retrieve our people,” I told Kauri. “We thank you for your patience.”

“We look forward to making your acquaintance, human,” Kauri said. “May the stars guide you.”

“And you,” I said.

I hoped Cuna was right that the kitsen would make excellent allies.

But at the moment, I would settle for having Cobb back, healthy and well.

## Five

When my flight hyperjumped near the coordinates we'd gotten from the hypercomm, we appeared in space around a large, bluish-white planet. A blinding star illuminated most of this side of it—far away, but still much larger and closer than I'd ever seen a star before. The planet was *huge*, even from this far out, and the whitish parts of it were moving across the surface, bubbling and roiling.

*Clouds*, I realized. Collections of moisture that would rain down periodically. I'd read about them, but I'd never imagined them looking so... fluffy. They looked almost *soft*, like cotton. Not like water at all.

"Oooh, that's pretty," Sadie said.

"Gorgeous," Kimmalyyn said. "And I'm reasonably certain at first glance it isn't going to eat us."

The rest of the flight detached and separated into wingmate pairs, with the medical transport ship sticking close to me. The flight adopted a wedge formation around us, with Arturo and Nedd taking point, FM and Sadie on one side, T-Stall and Catnip on the other, and the rest following.

"Can we fly through all of that?" I asked. Our starfighters were airtight of course, but I still wouldn't expect all the systems to function perfectly underwater.

This water wasn't solid though. It was more like steam rising from a boiling pot. Did that mean it would be scalding to touch? "Our ships can handle extremes in temperatures," I said. "So even if they're hot—"

"The clouds are not hot," Cuna said, sounding amused. They were riding with FM in the Dulo. We'd brought them along to help with diplomacy. "The atmospheric pressure allows the water to remain in its gaseous state at a low temperature."

Huh. Okay.

“I think it should be fine,” Alanik said. “Your ships handled the miasma, didn’t they? It’s just a different type of gas.”

Right. That made sense. “Still,” I said, “I think we should try to fly through the gaps between them.” Visibility would be limited in the clouds, and who knew what might be lurking within them. They shouldn’t be too difficult to avoid. Large swaths of the atmosphere were clear, showing through to a brilliant blue-green surface.

More water. An *ocean*. Stars, I’d read about those too, but I’d never been able to quite picture *so much water*. It sounded terrifying to live on a planet covered in that much water. How could you be sure it wasn’t going to wash over everything and swallow it?

I zoomed my proximity monitors way out, searching for other spacecraft or aircraft, but I couldn’t find any around the planet. If there were ships, they must be much closer to the planet’s surface. So far this didn’t seem like a Superiority trap, given the lack of cytonic inhibitors and enormous battleships, but we couldn’t rule out that they might have changed their tactics.

A signal came through the comms—a local radio transmission trying to reach me. I switched over. “This is Skyward One, callsign: Jerkface,” I said.

“Human!” a tiny voice said. It sounded like Kauri, though I wasn’t confident I’d be able to tell kitsen voices apart. “Welcome to the Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time. We will send you a heading to meet us on the Burrow from Which Spring Dreams Both Sweet and Sorrowful!”

“Um,” I said.

“Um,” Boomslug repeated.

“Thank you,” I said. “We look forward to...making your acquaintance.” Scud, I’d listened to enough political pleasantries in my life. Why could I never remember them when I needed them?

Kauri gave us the coordinates, and I instructed the flight to head toward them in formation. We flew down into the atmosphere of the planet and through a large gap in the clouds.

As we neared the enormous blue-green expanse, I began to be able to pick out landmasses—large islands of broken land that looked almost like crumbled pie crusts at this distance. The coordinates led us to one particularly large island, and we flew over some rock formations weathered into bulbous pillars, the stone worn into the same geometric shapes over and over like a castle made out of sand.

The coordinates marked a spot on the far side of the island where one edge of the land met the ocean. The water below us was moving, the blue-green edged with white sea foam where it met the beach.

Waves. I remembered learning about those—they were caused by wind and something to do with a moon, I thought, though I didn't see one of those at the moment. The sky was a wide swath of blue from down here, dotted with clouds, the sun too bright to look at without squinting.

A ship slightly larger than our fighters waited for us on the beach. I reached out to Alanik, who flew in front of me. *Do you sense any inhibitors?*

*No*, she said. *Still no cytonics either, though I think that ship has a taynix.*

That would make sense, if they had a hypercomm. These aliens had managed to steal a Superiority taynix, which was impressive. It also showed initiative, a good trait in allies. We couldn't be expected to protect every species in the galaxy when we could barely protect ourselves.

We cruised in for a landing on the sand, and I used my ship's air quality monitor to check the levels of oxygen in the atmosphere. The air appeared to be breathable, and there were no alerts about any noxious gases like the miasma on ReDawn.

I landed my ship within sight of the other vessel, and the rest of my flight landed around me. I waited until we were all on the ground before opening my canopy.

The ocean, I discovered, was scudding *loud*, like it was being run by a starfighter engine. The water rushed toward us, the peaks of the waves rising and then receding, like an arm reaching for something it couldn't quite grasp. I didn't understand how it *moved* like that, as if it were alive,

and it made me wish I'd paid more attention when they'd taught us about Old Earth.

I climbed out of my ship, and the members of my flight joined me one by one. Though we should have been focused on the ship, and watching for ambushes over the strange, layered sandstone cliffs that lined the beach, I noticed mine weren't the only eyes on the ocean.

I turned toward a flurry of motion over by the kitsen ship, shielding my eyes from the blinding sun. A group of rodents was moving toward us, the one in front floating on a disk about the size of a dinner plate—a small acclivity-stone craft, I was guessing. Most of the rodents were wearing flightsuits, but the floating one wore a red and gold uniform and had a furry head with a set of enormous ears that looked something like the pictures of foxes from Old Earth, though I thought foxes were bigger. These creatures were around twenty centimeters tall.

But they were coming toward me from a starship, standing on two legs, and wearing clothes, so...

I turned around, looking for Alanik. She was already walking up behind me. The sand seemed to slip from under her feet as she walked, making the trip laborious.

"These are kitsen?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "I've never met one, but I learned about the species before I left for Starsight. They have a dynastic culture, I believe."

Dynastic. That seemed so primitive, like something out of Spensa's stories.

Farther back on the sand, I could see Cuna and FM climbing out of the Dulo, which had landed next to the medical transport ship we'd brought along for Cobb and Gran-Gran.

The kitsen were growing closer now, and the robed one on the floating platform raised a paw clenched into a fist, like they were angry with me.

I wasn't the most qualified person to establish diplomatic relations, but I had been the one talking to Kauri over the radio.

"Hello," I called. "Are you...Kauri?"

“Yes, human!” the kitsen said. She had a translator pin affixed to the front of her uniform like a brooch. “I am Kauri.” She floated up in front of us on her dinner plate while the rest of her crew clambered over the sand behind her. “I am the captain of the *Swims Against the Current in a Stream Reflecting the Sun*, and I welcome you to our planet.”

“All their names are like that,” Alanik said quietly beside me. “The Superiority shortens the name of their planet to Evershore.”

The kitsen’s ears twitched, and I wondered if this was an offensive term given to them by their oppressors.

“That is very astute, Alanik!” Kauri said. “Indeed, you may call it that if you wish.”

“Evershore,” I said, glancing at the ocean again. “That seems fitting.” Though Alanik seemed somewhat alarmed that the kitsen knew her by name.

“Thank you, human,” Kauri said.

“You’re...a friend of Spensa’s?” I asked. “But you knew her as Alanik.”

Alanik seemed to relax a bit. It was probably disconcerting to meet people who felt they knew you, but didn’t quite.

FM and Cuna trudged up beside us. I was glad—I could use their help.

“Yes, I know Spensa,” Kauri said. “I was hoping to see her again after her disappearance from Starsight. Is she well?”

I didn’t know if Spensa was well, but I had to believe she was. “She’s on a mission to learn more about the delvers.”

“Ah yes,” Kauri said. “We were there when Winzik summoned the delver. A nasty decision, and one I fear he intends to repeat.”

FM and I exchanged a look. If this ship—stars, it would be a whole battleship to them, given their comparative size—was there in the battle with the delver, then the kitsen had been fighting on the other side.

“Which one of you is the human Jerkface?” Kauri asked.

Scud, I’d forgotten to introduce us. “Sorry,” I said. “That’s me. I’m flightleader Jorgen Weight. This is Alanik of the UrDail. And this is Minister Cuna.”



“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Cuna said. “Your people are quite advanced for a lesser species, and have been very close to acceptance into the Superiority. I hope that we will be able to help you continue to advance, as we consider what is best for all of your species.” Cuna raised their fist in the air with this pronouncement, in a similar greeting to the one Kauri had given me, though Kauri did not look impressed.

Alanik shot me a look. Cuna really had to stop announcing that they found every species we met to be beneath them. We’d brought them along to help with diplomacy, but I didn’t want it to seem like they spoke for all of us.

“And this is FM,” I said. “She’s our...diplomatic specialist.”

FM’s mouth fell open. I raised an eyebrow at her, questioning whether she was going to argue with me. I probably should have put her in charge of this interaction to begin with. I’d been too busy avoiding her to think of it, which meant I was letting my own personal feelings get in the way of my job. That had to stop.

“Thank you for the invitation to your beautiful planet,” FM said. “That rock formation we passed over on our way in—was that a city?”

Cuna bared their teeth in one of their strange smiles, which I thought meant they were okay with FM taking the lead.

Whether they were okay with it or not, it was clearly necessary.

“Yes!” Kauri said. “The Burrow from Which Spring Dreams Both Sweet and Sorrowful! You may call it Dreamspring, if you wish.”

“Dreamspring,” FM said. “That’s beautiful. I would love to see more of it.”

“And I would love to share it with you,” Kauri said. “But we must be careful. Not all of my people will welcome your—oh, how unfortunate.”

She looked up at something in the sky over my shoulder, and I turned to see another starship approaching. This one had a startling number of guns mounted on the front, far too many to be tactically effective.

“Humans!” said a kitsen voice through a loudspeaker on the ship. “Your invasion stops here! You shall not step one more foot into the beauty of the

Burrow from Which Spring Dreams Both Sweet and Sorrowful! We will cut you down where you stand.”

*Scud.* I took a step backward, taking shelter against my ship, and FM and Alanik joined me. If that ship let loose its destructors we were dead, all of us. The rest of the flight scattered, ducking beneath wings and jumping back into ships.

“It’s all right!” Kauri said. “That’s Goro. I will speak with him.”

“He said he was going to cut us down,” I said. “I don’t think that implies a lot of talking.”

“Yes,” Kauri said. “And he wonders why the Superiority thinks we’re primitive.”

The other ship didn’t fire, but instead began to lower itself onto the sand. Bits of grit blew in our direction, and I shielded my eyes.

A host of kitsen poured out of the ship, all of them wearing tiny suits of power armor and carrying guns no longer than my hand. That made them *enormous* to a kitsen though, and they all wore tiny metal helmets with a visor over their eyes and holes cut out for their ears.

That seemed somewhat impractical—I wondered if they used their ears to regulate their temperature like some animals did back on Old Earth. Or perhaps their ears grew back and were therefore seen as expendable.

In the air above them, riding on another dinner-plate-size platform, was a large kitsen wearing richly ornamented plate armor that looked like something out of another century entirely. His helmet had curved horns jutting out of it, so large that they almost reached the tips of his ears.

Oh, Spensa would *really* have loved *this*.

“Scudballs,” I heard Arturo say.

“Oh dear,” Cuna said. “Such aggression.”

I couldn’t argue with that. The kitsen swiftly marched across the sand. More of my flightmates climbed back into their ships. Since we were currently being flanked by what amounted to rats with rifles, I didn’t blame them. I supposed I should give orders to my flight, but I didn’t have any better idea what to do in this situation than they did.

FM stayed by my side, Alanik and Cuna a step behind.

Kauri rotated her platform to float between us and the oncoming kitsen, though her other people mostly seemed to be getting out of the way. Since they were both unarmed and unarmored, I didn't blame them either.

"Goro," Kauri said. "What are you doing?"

"We intercepted your transmission, traitor!" Goro said. "You invited these treacherous giants onto our planet. Bad enough that any of their kind are being permitted to sully our sands. We should have blown them out of the sky when they first appeared."

"No one is getting blown out of the sky!" Kauri said. "These are friends of a friend." She looked over her shoulder at me. "Aren't you?"

"Um, yes," I said.

"Other kitsen!" FM said. "I am a diplomatic representative from our people." I barely heard her add "apparently" under her breath. "We're here to collect our lost friends and discuss an alliance. We're not...invading anything, and we don't mean to...sully your sands."

"This is heresy!" Goro shouted, pointing a furry finger at me. He had quite a loud voice for such a small creature. "We will not be fooled by your gilded words! The Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time has seen the last of your tyranny and we will not suffer it again!"

"I'm sorry about him," said a voice near my feet, and I looked down to see that one of Kauri's people had scurried over to join us. "Goro has...a tendency toward the dramatic."

"It's understandable," Cuna said. "Your culture is not yet advanced enough to move beyond these aggressions."

FM sighed and ignored Cuna, addressing the kitsen at my feet. She had little white tufts at the ends of her ears and a brownish one at the end of her bushy white tail. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Hana," the kitsen said.

"Hi, Hana," FM said. "I'm FM. Your people have interacted with humans before?"

"When the first wave of humans conquered the galaxy, they started with us," Hana told her. "Our ancestors fought bravely, but they were no match

for human technology. And it didn't help that at first they welcomed the humans to our shores—the kindly giants straight out of legend! The tales of our early interactions through the nowhere had been passed down for generations.”

Goro's soldiers had stopped about three meters from Kauri, but their tiny kitsen leader floated his platform up until he stood toe to toe with her. “I demand that you step aside,” he said.

“I will not,” Kauri said. “I contacted the humans so they could collect their lost people. They aren't invading, and there is no need for all of... *this*.” She gestured at the kitsen soldiers, whose power armor hummed ominously. The kitsen hummed with it. It was probably meant to seem intimidating.

It was working.

“Very well,” Goro said. “If they claim to come in peace, they must prove it by the sword.”

A sword? I supposed that might be preferable to being shot at by many tiny rifles, but...*why*?

“Send forth one of your people,” Goro continued, “and they may duel my champion in honorable combat.”

“Champion?” I said.

A single warrior stepped out of the mass of kitsen. Her power armor was decorated by a tiny skirt, and her helmet curved into two wicked points underneath her chin. She was carrying a sword slightly longer than a dinner knife, which made it taller than she was.

I looked at FM, but she was staring at the kitsen champion. Cuna was watching us all with wide eyes, like they couldn't believe they had deigned to be present for so much barbarity.

On this particular point I had to agree, though it wasn't the barbarity that alarmed me so much as the practical concerns.

*A sword? Really?* “We're not fighting that,” I said. “No way.”

“I'll fight it!” Nedd called from behind me, and FM shot him a withering look.

“We don’t want to fight anyone!” FM said. “We’re here on a mission of peace. Our people have also been oppressed by the Superiority, and—”

A chortling sound came from the kitsen. Stars, were they laughing?

“You call it oppression?” Goro said. “When you leveled the great city of Defies the Void with Mighty Heart and Endless Perseverance, that was oppression! When you burned the forest of Rain Falls from Clear Skies, that was oppression! When you—”

“That’s enough,” Kauri said. “They get the point.”

“When it happened to you,” Goro added with a menacing growl, “it was *justice*.”

“Our people weren’t even involved in the last human war,” I said. “We were a traveling fleet of ships. It was only when the war was over that we were captured and contained by the Superiority. Also, that was a century ago, and—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Goro said. “All humans are the same.” He pointed at Kauri. “You returned from Starsight spouting ideals of democracy and claiming we could make decisions together without our esteemed One Who Was Not King! But then you skirt the will of the senate, and seek to ally yourself with the enemies of the Den of Everlasting—”

“You’re right!” Kauri shouted. “You’re right. We should have had a vote about it first. But *you* have marched your clan in here and challenged the humans to a fight without bringing your grievance before the senate, even though your clan’s representatives agreed that they would abide by senate decisions.”

Goro looked somewhat disgruntled at this point. “This is correct. But the invaders must be stopped immediately, so there is no time for—”

“We’re not invading!” FM reminded them.

“Right,” Kauri said. “There is still time to consult the senate and see if they are willing to hear the human offer of peace, or if they would prefer that your clan be permitted to prove them in trial by combat.”

Kauri seemed to find this as ridiculous as I did, so maybe it wasn’t a kitsen thing so much as a Goro thing. Kauri’s ship, after all, had only an average number of destructors.

“I didn’t agree to any trial,” I said. “By combat or otherwise.”

“Hush,” FM said. “She said they’re going to vote on it. We could at least wait to see how the vote turns out.”

Given the disaster that had resulted from the DDF trying to work with our own assembly, I wasn’t eager to meet with another group of politicians. But we were looking for alliances, so we’d have to work within the kitsen governmental framework at any rate.

“Fine,” I said.

“Very well,” Goro said. “First we will prepare a feast, and all may partake. Then, after the vote of the senate, we will see who is right.”

“A feast?” FM said to the kitsen at my feet. “That’s good, right? Unless they mean to poison us—”

Goro’s disk shot to the side, and he glared at FM. “Never would my clan participate in something so dishonorable!” he shouted. “Before you die, you will be staring down the glinting metal of my champion’s blade!”

“Um,” FM said. Even she was starting to look unnerved.

With that final outburst, Goro and his people marched back to their ship, their power armor leaving rows of tiny footprints in the sand. Kauri hunched a bit, clutching her hands together like she was trying very hard not to tell Goro exactly what she thought of him.

“The feast is not a good thing,” Cuna said. “Their tradition is to dine first with those they wish to fight to the death. Over the meal, each will try to determine the weakness of the other. They consider it...honorable.”

I didn’t like the implications of that. “We’re *not* going to *fight* them—”

“Hopefully you won’t have to,” Kauri said. She flew her platform over while Goro and his people piled into their miniature battleship. “I think the senate will see reason.”

“I’d like to see Cobb,” I said. “And Gran-Gran. The humans you found.”

“I can arrange that,” Kauri said. “If you will follow the *Swims Upstream*, we will take you to see your people.”

“Thank you,” I said. Hana raised her fist to us, and Kauri and her people traveled across the sands again to their ship.

“That was surreal,” FM said.

I nodded. “Not the welcome I expected to receive.”

But they were taking us to Cobb, and none of my people had yet found themselves on the wrong end of a kitsen blade, glinting or otherwise.

I supposed that meant we were doing okay.

## Six

We flew along the shoreline and landed beside the *Swims Upstream* on another beach below the cliffs that sheltered the towering city of Dreamspring. The stone cliffs had clearly been worn over time into fins and ridges by the wind, the sandstone striped with hundreds of red-orange layers. I directed the flight to leave their taynix in the boxes in their ships—the kitsen knew about hyperdrives, but I still didn't want to advertise that we had so many of them. I left Snuggles and Boomslug out of their box, but gave them a stern instruction to stay. I wanted at least one hyperdrive we could access in a hurry if things went wrong, so it was worth the risk that they'd disobey.

I joined Kauri, and my flight and the medtechs followed after us around a bend in the cliffside. The beach down the way was covered in kitsen who appeared to be playing in the surf and relaxing on the sand, at least until they spotted us. We *were* giants to them, and I watched carefully where I stepped, not wanting to flatten any picnic spots.

These kitsen were enjoying themselves, completely oblivious to the war with the Superiority. We were interlopers, bringing the conflict with us.

It was coming for them regardless, but it still felt tragic to disturb the peace. I wondered what it was like to live that way, in a place where taking a trip to the beach to sit and enjoy yourself was an option on any given afternoon.

The concept seemed alien, but stars, it must be nice.

The kitsen gathered together, watching us. Some appeared frightened, others curious, but none attacked us. Kauri floated out in front, waving both paws at the other kitsen. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but they seemed to believe she had us under control, because no one else came after us demanding that we duel their champion to the death.



We walked up a narrow path toward the city—no, it was a wide road to them. The path was lined with small mound-shaped structures cut into the rock or formed out of intricately worked sandstone. The structures had arched doorways with tiny stone or metal doors affixed to them. Some had signs in a language I couldn't read, while others had little pots of flowers sitting on the doorsteps or in boxes hanging from circular windows.

"Saints and stars," Sadie said somewhere behind me. "This is so *cute*!"

She wasn't wrong. It reminded me of a story my mother had told me when I was a child, about a man named Gulliver who traveled to a land full of little people who were wary of him because of his size. He befriended them, but was later kicked out when he doused a fire in the palace by peeing on it.

As a child I'd found that part of the story hilarious. Now I thought maybe the little people had a point.

I shielded my eyes from the sun and looked up the hill at the mountainous city. As the road ascended, the little burrow structures began to pile up, dug into the walls of the cliff or sculpted one on top of another into tiny hills with doors on all sides and at all levels. I wondered if they opened into tiny multi-floored houses, or if each entrance went to a separate room isolated from the others. As we walked, little kitsen hovercars pulled over to the side of the road to allow us to pass. They chattered at each other, some too far away or faint for the pin to translate, though I did catch a few words.

"—humans returned!—"

"—don't look threatening—"

"—can't trust them, look how they—"

"—dione with them, does that mean—"

I glanced back and found that Kimmalyn had stopped, bent down beside what looked like a landscaping shop with barrels and stacks of bricks and groundcovers, all organized by type. A kitsen waited out front while two others used a large metal winch to load a huge decorative rock into the back of a hovertruck.

I couldn't hear what Kimmalyyn said—she didn't have a translator pin, so she wouldn't have been understood anyway. But then the kitsen stepped back and Kimmalyyn lifted the rock—which was only half the size of her palm, but still enormous for the tiny creatures—and set it in the rear of the truck.

One of them tipped its nose up at her, and I hoped that was a gesture of thanks. We didn't need to be accused of property damage or delivering insults. The kitsen we'd met so far didn't seem like they'd appreciate being condescended to.

"Do you think she should be doing that?" I asked FM.

"She's not hurting anything," FM said.

Cuna walked up behind us. "Compassion is universal," they said. "It's seen in all cultures, though it is communicated differently."

FM sighed. "I suppose there might be some cultural norm we're not aware of, but any of us could break one of those at any time and cause an interstellar incident."

"Scud, our lives have gotten weird," I said.

"That's the truth," Arturo said, following us up the road. "It was simpler when we were fighting the Krell."

Simpler, but also stagnant. Our people had spent eighty years fighting for our lives, which meant we had very specialized skills. We were a well-oiled survival machine, but we lacked something these people had. It wasn't happiness exactly. We had that, even if it was tempered by pain and fear.

Prosperity maybe. Peace. I wondered if this was what we would have seen on ReDawn, if we'd spent any time in their cities.

Kauri had drifted ahead of us a bit, and she hovered back, watching us. "Do you need to stop and rest?" she asked. "I'm sorry if I'm outpacing your human endurance." Her shipmates were walking up the path on foot, and they seemed fine. They ran many steps to our one, but they didn't seem to be tiring.

"No, we're fine," I said. "Just appreciating your beautiful city."

"This used to be the home of Hesho, the Most Honorable and Magnificent One Who Was Not King. He died in the battle with the delver

at your planet.” She gave a little sigh. “We miss him. The Superiority insisted that we needed to transition to a democracy in order to advance to primary citizenship, and I think that change was good for us. But I wish Lord Hesho had remained here with us to see the initiative of his people. He and his ancestors before him served us well for centuries.”

Kauri continued to lead us up the path, and the pinnacles of the city of Dreamspring came into view. The cliff had been split into little vertical ridges, the effect uneven enough to be natural rather than kitsen-made. The rock was full of holes and walkways so the kitsen could duck from tunnel to tunnel all across the cliff face of the upper city. The city only rose in height along the cliff face; in front it opened into a sprawling urban landscape that filled the stone area between the sheer cliff and the sand of the beach.

Here along the wall, our faces were even with the higher stories of pathways and tunnels. Scud, we wouldn’t fit in their buildings. We couldn’t sit down in their homes with them or enter their shops. I imagined what we would feel like on Detritus if ships full of sixty-foot giants suddenly arrived. They’d be unable to fit in our elevators, unable to visit our caverns.

We’d be terrified. It was a miracle that the kitsen had welcomed the humans in the past. And those humans had taken advantage of their trust—that wasn’t our fault, but we were responsible for overcoming that history now.

“Kauri,” I said, “I know you need to speak to your senate, but where will we even be able to meet with them?”

“Our senate meets in a large auditorium,” Kauri said. “We can welcome you there, but you’ll have to remain on the floor. I’m afraid we don’t have any chairs that will accommodate you. We destroyed all the humans’ dwellings after they were expelled from our planet in the Second Human War. Perhaps we could find some sturdy tables for you to sit on.”

I worried about our ability to sit on even the sturdiest of kitsen tables. Like FM said, we didn’t want to cause any interstellar incidents. “We can sit on the ground,” I said. “If there’s room.”

“As long as that wouldn’t be too much of an insult,” Kauri said. “We wish to meet with you as equals, but we do not know your customs.”

“No,” I said. “No insult. Where exactly are Cobb and Gran-Gran?” They wouldn’t have fit inside these buildings either. And if they were unconscious—stars, they wouldn’t fit inside a kitsen hospital.

“Our feasting grounds are just beyond the turn of the cliff, and the tent with your people is beyond those,” Kauri said. “We might be able to put up another tent large enough to shade you while you eat, but the first one took us quite a bit of effort to construct.”

“It’s not necessary,” I said. “Please, take us to Cobb and Gran-Gran.”

We took a narrow road across the clearing in front of the cliffs, the roads continuing to empty as we passed through. When we reached the other side of the city, the road turned toward the beach again, and Kauri presented the feasting grounds, which were basically a wide stretch of sand with stone tables and small gazebos set against the cliff. Some of Goro’s people—I recognized them by their armor—were filleting fish as big as they were and loading them onto conveyers that rolled into ovens carved out of the cliff face.

“Scud, I don’t know if we can eat the food here,” I said.

“What are those things?” Alanik said, staring at the fish. “They look... slimy.”

Huh. They wouldn’t have fish on ReDawn, I supposed. We had some that we raised in vats, and a few that lived wild in underground lakes.

“Those are fish,” Cuna said. “They pull them from the ocean and eat them. You will be better off trying the fruit.” They gestured to the bowls and platters being laid out on the banquet tables. “It should be palatable to your people.”

Alanik did not look thrilled, though she’d been polite about the food we’d given her on Detritus, despite most of it being made out of algae.

“If you want to leave some of your people here you may,” Kauri said. “The tent near the hospital is up ahead.”

“That sounds good,” I said. I waved to Kel and Winnow—our medtechs—to join us.

I looked over at Alanik. The kitsen seemed to react better to her, since she wasn’t human. “Come with me?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Do you want me to come?” FM asked.

“No,” I said. “Stay here and maybe do some diplomacy?”

FM gave me a withering look.

Cuna wandered over to the kitsen, observing their cooking. I lowered my voice. “Try to make sure Cuna doesn’t insult them too much,” I said. “And that Nedd doesn’t volunteer to duel creatures one-tenth his size, all right?”

“I can try to make sure he doesn’t volunteer *again*,” FM said.

“Good. I do not need that on my conscience.”

FM turned to the others and directed them out onto the beach.

The burrow that Kauri said held the hospital was enormous, towering up into the air. There were many small doors into the complex itself, none of which an adult human could fit through. The kitsen only needed a small fraction of the head clearance humans did.

Kauri led us to a tent that had been erected out front. It looked like many smaller tents had all been affixed together on long poles, creating a structure perhaps three meters long by two meters wide. The roof was about the height of my shoulders, so when Kauri maneuvered her platform near the entrance and pulled back the tent flap, I had to stoop to look inside.

There, on two platforms so low to the ground that I thought they might originally have been kitsen banquet tables, lay Cobb and Gran-Gran. Their bodies had been covered with many blankets layered over each limb and across their torsos.

Kel and Winnow both ducked inside, and Kauri continued to hold the tent flap open as they examined Gran-Gran and Cobb. They were both breathing, I was relieved to see, but their eyes were closed, and one side of Cobb’s face was covered in bruises. Some medical equipment was attached to the side of the tables, and kitsen wearing little white robes and hats were surveying it. One stood on a ladder that reached to about the height of my knee, changing out the tiny bottle on what looked like a makeshift IV pole.

At least they were alive and had already received medical attention. “You’ll want to get them home to your people, I imagine,” Kauri said.

“Yes,” I said. “We brought a medical transport ship, and our medtechs will supervise the transfer.”

Alanik was watching them both with concern on her face, and she shook her head. “I’m still not sure that’s Becca Nightshade.”

I blinked. The person in the bed looked like Spensa’s grandmother. “Why do you say that?”

“Because she isn’t cytonic,” Alanik said.

I reached out, trying to sense the vibration I always felt near another cytonic. I could feel waves of it rolling off Alanik.

But she was right. Nothing from Gran-Gran. Farther out, I could feel our taynix still in our ships, but no other cytonics.

But there was something, a vibration coming from the cliffs behind us. Not the concentrated frequency of a cytonic mind, but more like a...cloud of something.

“Do you feel that?” I asked. “The strange buzzing from behind the cliffs?”

Alanik frowned. “No,” she said. “I’m not finding any cytonic presence here.”

That was odd, and I had no idea what it meant. I moved past Winnow to Gran-Gran’s bed and brushed the blanket off her hand on one side and then the other, checking for hologram bracelets.

There weren’t any. And if the Superiority were trying to trick us, where was the spring for the trap? I reached up and brushed Gran-Gran’s hair with my hand. It moved exactly as I expected it to.

“I think that’s her,” I said. “But you’re right, her cytonic abilities seem to be gone. What *happened* to them? And why did they end up *here*?”

“Gran-Gran was behaving strangely before she hyperjumped,” Alanik said. “She told me she could tell where Cobb was on the ship, which doesn’t make sense. He’s not cytonic, so she shouldn’t have been able to find him through the negative realm.”

That was strange. “But you knew it was her then,” I said. “Because you were familiar with her mind. So was I. She wasn’t a Superiority fake.”

“She also said she was hearing voices calling to her, asking her for help,” Alanik said. “She asked if they were my people.”

I narrowed my eyes. That could have been the Superiority interfering with her cytonics. Like what happened to Spensa’s father.

I looked at the medtechs. “What is their condition?”

“They seem stable,” Kel said.

“We’ve focused on keeping them nourished and hydrated,” Kauri added. “Our lorekeepers have some records of what nutrients your people need.”

“Cuna said that your people don’t have cytonics,” I said, “but that you still have information about them.”

“Yes,” Kauri said. “Our lorekeepers have preserved the records, and they study and understand them, but we have not had kitsen cytonics for centuries. Some of my people believe it’s a curse, that we haven’t proven ourselves worthy to regain the powers.”

That was unfortunate. Still, detailed records of cytonic powers would be useful. “We would love to speak to your lorekeepers,” I said.

“Of course,” Kauri said. “I will send a message saying that you’ve requested an audience with them.”

“In the meantime, we can load Cobb and Gran-Gran into the transport ship.” Something strange was happening with Gran-Gran, possibly with both of them, and they needed better medical care than our medtechs could give here in the field.

“I think you should meet with our senators first,” Kauri said. “If you remove your people from the planet before the meeting, Goro may try to use that as evidence that you’re trying to sneak away, or that you’re preparing to attack.”

I hesitated, looking to Winnow.

“I don’t think a few hours are going to make a difference,” Winnow said. “Unless their conditions worsen.”

That was fair. I looked at Cobb one more time. His face was pale, but he was breathing. He was alive.

We’d wake him up. We had to.

He had to find us a way out of this mess.

## Seven

When we returned to the feast area, we found FM sitting cross-legged at one of the tables, rolling melons the size of her head through a machine with many coordinated blades that cut them into precise slices. Nedd and Arturo sat behind her, loading citrus fruits onto small spindles that spun around a sharp blade, which removed the peel in a long, thin strip. Nedd deposited the peels into very small waste canisters, which two kitsen replaced with empty canisters and then scurried away to offer the full canisters to a pen filled with miniature goats, about the right size for a kitsen to ride as a mount. Kimmalyn and Sadie were seasoning fish with very small seasoning shakers, while Catnip and T-Stall knelt next to the ovens, using handheld controls to remove the fish from the conveyors with acclivity-empowered spatulas.

“I’m sorry,” Kauri said to me. “You are our guests. Your people shouldn’t have been asked to prepare the food.”

Hana ran up, sitting at my feet. “We didn’t ask them,” she said. “They volunteered. In fact, FM *insisted*.”

FM raised her eyebrows at me from across the sandy pavilion.

“We take no offense,” I said. “Thank you for allowing us to serve you.”

FM smiled.

This was kind of brilliant of her. We were trying to convince them that we weren’t invaders. I bet the humans who’d marched in and declared them a colony didn’t offer to help them with food preparation.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

Alanik and I were brought to rotating spits where squashes roasted over a fire. We were instructed to use miniscule spray bottles to hydrate the turning vegetables with a brownish liquid that smelled both sweet and spicy.

I sprayed a bit on my finger and tasted it. Stars, it was delicious.



Not long after, Goro arrived. His champion rode on the saucer beside him, her sword tucked into a sheath and strapped across her back.

Goro didn't look happy to see us all helping prepare the food. He gave me an especially affronted glare. I was supposed to be the enemy, the invader he was here to defeat.

Putting FM in charge of diplomacy had clearly been the right decision.

When we finished the food preparation, several kitsen carried away the remaining waste and cooking implements, and Kauri returned with another kitsen riding a second, smaller saucer.

"This is Juno," she told me. "One of our lorekeepers. He has offered to dine with you, though he will wait until after the senate meeting to impart knowledge."

"I am sorry this is necessary," Juno said, "but there are some among us who find our lorekeeping to be superfluous or even threatening. It was only the will and continued patronage of the Most Honored One Who Was Not King that sustained our order. We do not wish to go against the will of the senate or attract the ire of—"

"Humans!" Goro bellowed from the head of one of the large tables. "It is time to begin to feast. I will not offer you welcome! You come as invaders, and so we give you the greeting fit for those who dare think to conquer the Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time! A full belly to make you sluggish, so that my champion may more easily pierce you with the sword!"

"Well that's disturbing," FM muttered beside me.

"At least he's upfront about it," Alanik added.

"Let us feast!" Goro shouted, and the kitsen all echoed these last words with their fists raised in the air.

I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a grave tactical error by dining with these creatures. I thought we were doing the right thing by being diplomatic and trying to prove we weren't here to conquer them. But now I worried they would discover some weakness they might use against us.

"Juno," I said as one of the kitsen brought me a small plate—it must have been an oversized serving platter to them—piled high with fish and

nuts. “I know you don’t want to share your knowledge with us until the senate agrees to it, but may I ask if any of this food is poisonous to humans?”

“Certainly,” Juno said. “The photophores of the flatfish are mildly venomous, but those have been removed. Our records show that humans ate most of our foods, and indeed put a great strain on our resources, trying to export some of our most prized delicacies for their own gain. To answer your question, the only foods we eat that would be poisonous to you are a few varieties of berry and some of our summer shellfish, and none of those have been offered to you this day. Make no mistake, Goro means to kill you, but he will only do so with senate permission and in the way that is most advantageous to him.”

Over at Goro’s table, I heard him comparing his fish to a worthy foe slain in battle. That seemed like a stretch to me, but I’d once heard Spensa muttering something that sounded a lot like “fear the wrath of my very soft socks” on requisition day, so she probably would have approved. I wasn’t sure how fighting one of us with a sword could be advantageous to him, but clearly he had some kind of endgame in mind.

FM poked at her own fish, then took a bite. “This is delicious.”

“Eh,” Nedd said, settling down cross-legged on the sand by Kimmalyn. “It’s a little fishy.”

FM blinked at him. “It is literally fish.”

“Right,” Nedd said. “But...*fishy* fish.”

“Totally,” Catnip said. “I hate it when my food adjectives its own noun.”

“Exactly,” Nedd said.

“It’s like the Saint says,” Kimmalyn added. “You are what you eat.”

“Hey, look!” Sadie said. “There are boats out there!” She pointed out onto the water, beyond the waves. The noise from the ocean was fainter this far up on the beach. And out on the blue-green expanse that seemed to go on and on forever until it melded with the sky...scud, she was right. There were ships out there. Sailing vessels that couldn’t have been much longer than a meter or two, bobbing up and down in the waves.

“I understand the basics of how boats work,” I said. “But how do they do that? How do they *sail* out there on all that water, without worrying that it’s going to swallow them up?”

“Sometimes it does,” Juno said. “The water is dangerous, especially for sailors who are caught in a sudden storm. As for how they brave it—how do you fly into the blackness of space? It seems just as unknowable to me, and a great deal more vast.”

That...was a really good point.

“I don’t know,” Arturo said. “You can’t drown in space.”

“But you can asphyxiate,” Nedd said. “Which sounds just as unpleasant.”

The food suddenly felt heavy in my mouth. I set down my fork, which might have originally been some sort of gardening implement.

“Or freeze to death,” Catnip added. “It’s cold in space.”

“The ocean can be cold,” Juno said. “Depending on the currents and the time of year.”

“You don’t depressurize if you jump into the ocean though,” Nedd said. “That scud sounds nasty. Did you know it can make your saliva boil in your mouth?”

“Ew, Nedd,” FM said. “We’re eating.”

The Superiority ship exploded before my eyes. The bodies of my parents were flung into space, fluids voiding, their eyeballs boiling.

I shook my head and set down my plate. That hadn’t happened. They’d been torn apart by the mindblades first.

Hadn’t they?

“The ocean does the opposite,” Juno said. “The pressure in its depths is so great it can crush you.”

“Whoa,” Nedd said. “That’s awesome.”

Stars. Why did everything in the galaxy feel like it was trying to kill us? I had started this conversation, but now I had to get away from it. “Excuse me,” I said, and I got up, leaving my food behind. I moved away from the city, down the beach toward the water.

A projectile shot over the ocean, and I flinched. Was the *water* attacking us now?

But no, it was a *bird*—a whole flock of them, wings tucked against their bodies as they shot like bullets into the waves, and then flapping to give them lift again, carrying them into the air with fish in their mouths.

Stars. I'd seen pictures of birds, but watching them glide over the water like so many starfighters...

It was incredible, but it didn't stop my hands from shaking.

I wiped cold sweat from my forehead. Scud, I'd walked away from the feast. Was I ruining our diplomatic relations? Offending the kitsen somehow? Would they perceive this as a threat?

It didn't matter. I couldn't go back. I couldn't *breathe*. As I stared out at the ocean, the whole of it pressed down on me, all the weight of what felt like millions of miles of water bearing down on my body.

It was too much.

"Jorgen?" FM said. I wheeled around to find her watching me with concern.

Scud, not concern. Anything but concern. I wished she'd look at me the way she had back on the platform on ReDawn, when she'd been pissed at me for telling her she shouldn't have liberated the slugs from Detritus. She'd been so angry at me, when I'd simply pointed out the obvious—she'd broken the chain of command, violated our orders, and put our comrades in danger.

*You are not my flightleader*, she'd said.

That had gutted me then, but I found it infinitely preferable to what I knew she was going to say now.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said.

"Jorgen," FM said. "You aren't fine."

"Yes," I said. "I am."

"That's ridiculous. You can't be fine. Your parents—"

"This isn't the time!" I said. "We are in the middle of a diplomatic mission! We need to talk to the senate so we can get Cobb and Gran-Gran home."

Once we brought Cobb back though, Stoff was definitely going to declare him indisposed. There was no avoiding that. In fact, according to protocol, I should have already told Stoff that we'd found Cobb and he was indeed unconscious.

I...didn't want to. As soon as I did, Stoff would be fully within his rights to start acting as admiral. I had no idea what he would do, but whatever it was...I didn't trust it. Cobb knew what was best for the DDF, for our people, for Detritus. He should be the one in charge.

He would get us through this.

FM stared at me with her lips pressed together like she was trying to hold in all the things she wanted to say.

"This isn't about Cobb," she said finally. "It's not about Gran-Gran, and it's not about our diplomatic mission."

"Exactly," I said. "And those are the only things that matter right now."

"That's not true," she said. "*You* matter, Jorgen. What happened to you, it matters."

I balled my fists, turning away from her to look out at the sea. A particularly large wave washed up the beach, and I wished it would come all the way up and wash me out to sea and be done with it. I imagined the water pulling me down, crushing me the way Juno said it would, all that weight blocking out the questions, the demands, the *needs* of everyone else.

Moments ago all that water had seemed terrifying. Now it felt like release.

"Jorgen," FM said, "you need to talk to someone. It doesn't have to be me, but have you said *anything* about your parents? To anyone?"

I hadn't. I couldn't. Not until I knew everyone was safe.

"We need to be prepping for the senate meeting," I said. "Go ask Kauri what we can do to support her in convincing the senate we're here in peace."

"I don't think—"

"Do it, FM."

"Jorgen—"

"That's an *order*."

I looked back at her, and she stared at me. There was some anger there now, and that was good. Much better than pity. For a moment I thought she was going to tell me off again, announce that I wasn't her flightleader and I couldn't tell her what to do. Say what we both knew: that I was only pretending to be in control, that I'd never known what I was doing, that I was incompetent to be in command, and that I was failing at everything—even this.

“Fine,” FM said, and she spun around and marched back up the beach. Past her I could see that the rest of the flight had finished eating. Kauri escorted them down to the water, where Nedd and Kimmalyne took off their shoes and rolled up their jumpsuits, letting the water wash over their feet. Alanik and Arturo sat in the sand, laughing.

I couldn't remember what it felt like to laugh.

I wondered if that meant I had already drowned.

# Eight

I was still on edge when Kauri led us to the senate assembly, held in an arena built into the cliffside. The arena was an enormous space for the kitsen, containing hundreds upon hundreds of small padded seats carved into the sandstone, ascending up to the ceiling at the back of the room. There was barely space for Alanik to stand, and I had to hunch my shoulders to avoid scraping my head.

The floor at the bottom of the seats provided enough space for a few of us to sit. The others stayed on the beach, while FM, Alanik, and I all tried to squeeze in together. We'd used the lack of space to leave Cuna out of the meeting, but in reality I was afraid of what they might say.

We had to sit with our knees tucked up to our chests to fit all three of us. A kitsen floated on a small platform with a raised wall around it, like a cup we might drink out of on Detritus. The cup had a microphone attached to the front of it like on a podium.

"I am Adi, director of the senate," the kitsen said. "It is my job to ensure that the proceedings progress in an orderly fashion. You will not speak unless you are asked a direct question."

"Will we be given an opportunity to plead our case?" I asked. "We're trying to retrieve our friends and offer an alliance, and if we aren't allowed to speak—"

"You may be called upon to speak if there are questions," Adi said. "Please do not speak out of turn."

We *may* be. Stars, I hoped Kauri had this under control.

The kitsen senators began to file in, all wearing silk robes of a similar style. The colors varied widely, and I wondered if they were based on personal preference, or if they indicated what region the kitsen was from. We'd landed on this island, but we'd passed over hundreds more. As the hall began to fill, I noticed physical differences in the kitsen as well. Some

had longer ears and smaller snouts, while others had darker coloring to their fur. A pair in the back each had an ear notched as if ceremonially cut, and one that took a seat toward the front had a row of silver earrings pierced all the way up to the tip on one side.

“That’s a lot of kitsen,” FM whispered beside me. “Are you going to do the talking if there are questions?”

“I appointed you our diplomatic specialist,” I said. “You should do it.”

FM took a deep breath. “Okay. But if I say something wrong, I’m a little afraid Goro’s champion is going to run me through with a sword. It’s not easy to get in and out of here. We wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“I’ll talk, if neither of you wants to,” Alanik said.

“No,” FM said. “I can do it. But...”

Goro arrived, riding on his disc with his champion beside him. He’d left the rest of his entourage outside. The champion’s sword was still sheathed, and I hoped it would remain so.

Goro lowered his platform to be even with the bottom row of chairs, presumably so he wouldn’t block the view of any of the senators. This put him alarmingly close to Alanik’s knees, but she didn’t seem intimidated by him.

It was hard to be intimidated by something so small, but that didn’t mean I wanted his champion charging our ankles with a sword. Diplomatic disaster or not, someone could get seriously hurt, and it could be one of us.

Adi called the meeting to order. Only about a third of the senate seats were filled, but I imagined there were probably senators who were away, or who hadn’t been able to gather on such short notice. A lot of the kitsen were watching us suspiciously, but none of them were advancing on us with weapons drawn, so this was still an improvement.

Until they started to speak.

Adi gave both Goro and Kauri the floor, which surprised me. I’d sat through enough boring assembly speeches that I expected this meeting to be much the same. But instead, Goro and Kauri entered into a sort of debate.

“These human invaders,” Goro said, “must be dealt with. Given our long and violent history with them, we know what language the giants speak.



They must receive the only communication they understand—a swift and violent lesson by combat. Their kind has brought only ruin upon our shores, and it is up to us to visit vengeance upon all our enemies.”

FM leaned over and whispered to me. “He says violence is the only language *we* speak, but he’s the one who keeps trying to attack us.”

That was an interesting argument. I wanted to hear more, but it was apparently Kauri’s turn.

“The humans *aren’t* our enemies,” Kauri said. “They have come by my invitation to collect their friends who arrived here by accident, and who are even now receiving medical treatment. They also bring with them a promise of an alliance, which they have already established with the UrDail.”

Most of the audience eyed Alanik, and Alanik stared back at them, stone faced.

She wasn’t any better with people than I was, but at least she didn’t go around referring to them as lesser. She leaned over to me. “You could just fight him,” Alanik said. “He is literally asking for it. Any of us could beat him in combat.”

“If we do that,” FM said, “we’ll only solidify their image of us as dangerous, violent, and aggressive. All the things we’re trying to prove we aren’t.”

Besides, the kitsen were fast and trained in dueling. I wouldn’t put it past them to get a good blow in on one of us and seriously injure us. I doubted they’d manage to kill us, but I didn’t want any of it on my conscience.

If Spensa were here, she would have seen it differently. She would have dueled the kitsen and probably won spectacularly, and would have somehow spun that victory into an alliance. But she wasn’t here, and I was doing the best I could.

“Of course they *say* they come in peace,” Goro said. “But we all know what humans are like.”

“I don’t think we do!” Kauri said. “Humans invaded us in the past, but *these* humans have a common enemy in the Superiority. I was there when Winzik summoned a delver to destroy the humans.”

“It was in that battle that we lost our most Honored and Revered One Who Was Not King!” Goro said. “If we had not meddled in interstellar affairs, he would be with us even now.”

“It was Lord Hesho’s decision to answer the Superiority’s call,” Kauri said. “Do you question his will?”

Goro sputtered. “No, but—”

Kauri continued as if Goro hadn’t interrupted her. “The delver immediately turned on Winzik’s own people, but still he persists. He offered us a path to primary citizenship, but we were only pawns meant to enact his violence for him. If we don’t begin to forge alliances, we will stand alone when the destruction comes.”

“This is fearmongering,” Goro said. “The humans are the real threat.”

Kauri replied and the two of them went on, arguing back and forth.

Juno, the kitsen lorekeeper, sat in the front row near my feet. I leaned forward and whispered to him. “Is it always like this?”

Juno leaned toward me. “No,” he said. “Our senate is young. Before we lost our king he made the decisions, instructing our people how to vote. It was easier then for us to arrive at decisions. Our wills were aligned, and we had unity.”

Alanik bristled a little at the wording, but I saw his point. That was the way the DDF worked. Our admiral made the decisions, and the rest of us carried them out. We could act quickly that way, and decisively.

But it also meant we could swiftly make the wrong decision, if the person at the top made the wrong call.

I thought about what Arturo said, that our lives were easier when we could think about things simply. We had to kill the Krell because they were trying to kill us. There was no moral ambiguity, no diplomacy to navigate. I supposed after a fashion my parents had been doing something brave, trying to pioneer a new way.

In other circumstances, they might have been heroes.

Goro looked ruffled, like he felt he was starting to lose the argument. “We must settle this matter decisively,” he said. “Allow my champion to

fight a champion of the humans' choosing. Our might will decide the victor."

He seemed to have only that one argument, and I noticed no one in the senate had brought a champion with a sword. We hadn't seen anyone else dressed like Goro in the city either. He was the only one insisting that a trial by combat was a reasonable course of action.

"The humans have already said they mean us no harm," Kauri said. "They don't want to fight with us. A physical fight between kitsen and giant would only cause unnecessary pain."

"To them maybe!" Goro said. "My champion will fell the giant like our heroes of old! They will not stand before the blades of—"

Yeah, his argument was starting to reach the fever pitch of someone who knew they were losing. But the senate members hadn't given their opinions yet, so why would he be?

Goro looked over at me and seemed...confused.

Was he trying to *bait* us into fighting him? That would certainly make his argument easier.

Kauri followed his gaze and I raised a hand, indicating that I wanted to speak.

"For my next argument," Kauri announced, "I would like to introduce the witness testimony of Flightleader Weight."

Goro hunched a bit, looking disgruntled.

"Jorgen?" FM whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Trying something," I said.

"This is preposterous," Goro mumbled. "A human should not speak to the senate."

"Kauri is allowed to enter the testimony of another to make her argument for her," Adi said imperiously. "Flightleader Weight, you may speak."

Stars, I wished I was more prepared for this. I'd have preferred to have FM do it, but there wasn't time. She was right. If we gave even the slightest indication that we would participate in Goro's duel, we solidified their already terrible preconceptions of us. "On behalf of my people," I said,

“I’m sorry for what you’ve suffered at human hands. But we aren’t interested in fighting you.”

“They arrived with destructors on their ships,” Goro said, “and they expect us to believe—”

“You will wait your turn,” Adi admonished him, and Goro snarled a bit but shut his mouth.

“Our destructors are used in defense,” I said. “Of ourselves and of our allies. And we would very much like you to *be* our allies.”

Goro’s furry little brow bunched, and his champion leaned over and whispered something to him, though Goro waved her off.

Kauri gave a triumphant little smile. “I rest,” she said. And she nodded to me.

Goro *had* been trying to bait us into something. And if we’d risen to the bait and fought his champion, we would have proven everyone right about us. Goro clearly wanted that. Was it because our presence weakened his power, or did he think he was doing his people a favor by trying to reveal our true intentions?

“Very well,” Adi said. “The argument is over. We will now hear from the senate.”

Kauri turned around and raised her fist at me, in a gesture I was coming to recognize as both a greeting and approval.

Goro floated closer, his champion standing beside him with her gauntleted arms crossed. “I don’t know what your game is, human,” he grumbled.

“I don’t have a game,” I said. “Except to bring our people home, make peace with you, and coordinate a resistance against the Superiority.”

Goro narrowed his beady little eyes at me. “Your people never looked at us as allies before.”

“And I’m sorry for that,” I told him. “But we aren’t them. We’re concerned about your welfare, and the welfare of all the species the Superiority claims are lesser.”

I looked over at FM and she nodded her approval. Stars, maybe I was getting some of this right at least.

“Hmph,” Goro said, crossing his arms to mirror his champion. “Well, we will see.”

Paws waved in the air all around the room, and Adi floated her microphone over to them, allowing the senators to speak.

The first few senators focused on Goro’s argument—his right to challenge newcomers to a trial by combat. Several felt there was no harm in granting his request—though they all seemed to regard it as odd—and suggested we should be obliged to appoint a champion or leave the planet in disgrace. The kitsen with the rings in his ears said that Goro had no authority over Dreamspring or the surrounding island, so his challenge was invalid. Goro would need to wait and reissue it if one of us set foot on his island, which had another long name I didn’t quite follow.

Stars, it was getting hot in here. We were inside the rock, where it should have been cooler, but the heat of so many bodies in one place was starting to make the room humid and stuffy.

I looked over at FM, who was listening to the kitsen speak with obvious and growing concern. “This isn’t going well,” she said to me.

She was right. Instead of focusing on what I’d said about peace, the conversation was getting bogged down in the disputed legality of Goro’s request. And in between, senators began to comment on the bigger issue—dare they defy the Superiority by working with us? That would mean throwing away all their progress toward primary citizenship. They gave up their *monarchy* for that, which they all seemed to consider a great sacrifice.

“Lord Hesho gave his life to try to further our cause with the Superiority,” one of the kitsen with a notched ear said. “How can we dishonor his sacrifice by abandoning his quest?”

Kauri squirmed like she dearly wanted to argue with that, but both she and Goro remained silent, which I gathered was the rule.

We had not been given permission to speak again, and we hadn’t interrupted. I simultaneously wished someone would ask our opinion and was unsure of what I would say.

If Spensa were here, she’d say *something*. She wouldn’t be able to sit here and listen to this without telling them how wrong they were. She

wouldn't worry about finding the right words—she'd trample forward on moxie alone, and it would *work*, because Spensa was amazing like that.

And somehow she had confidence in *me*. Stars, I could have used a little of that confidence right now. I let my mind slip into the nowhere, searching for her. Alanik was sitting right here, and while I didn't hear her in the nowhere, I also didn't want her to open her mind and hear me, so I stayed quiet, looking, listening.

The kitsen senators continued to argue, but I caught only snatches.

“—Superiority has the power. Who are these humans, that they think they can win—”

The nowhere was quiet as ever, devoid even of that strange raised texture I'd encountered on Platform Prime.

There was *something* though, there in the emptiness. Not Spensa, but... an *image* of her. She was...cleaning a part from a starfighter. I couldn't see the area around her, but I could see *her*, and could sense...her loneliness. And a feeling of concern for her that wasn't mine. It came from the image, from the nowhere.

Stars, was the *nowhere* concerned about Spensa? It was only a strange place, it couldn't think or feel—

Could it?

The kitsen went on, the arguments getting more heated as they went.

“—threaten our way of life. We shouldn't be working with any of them, unless we want—”

The image of Spensa faded. It hadn't seemed like it came from Spensa herself, but I had no idea where—or who—it had come from. It was gone now, and I couldn't find it again.

“—destruction for us and all our kin. If we aren't careful—”

An image welled up in my mind—the Superiority ship where my parents died, cut to ribbons and expanding ever outward against the blackness of space.

I shoved it down, reaching through the nowhere again. Spensa was in here somewhere. I'd found that image, I should be able to find *her*. Even if we couldn't talk, I wanted to *know* she was *there*—

That vibration I'd felt before grew stronger, a cytonic resonance from somewhere on the island. And then, loud in my mind, a voice cried, *HELP US!* and I visibly startled.

Other than Juno, who looked up at me in alarm, the other kitsen didn't seem to notice. Both FM and Alanik did though, and they turned to me.

*Are you okay?* Alanik asked.

*Fine*, I said. I drew back into myself. That voice—it had come from the nowhere, but it wasn't Spensa. I didn't know *who* it was. Maybe Gran-Gran? But she was here on Evershore, not in the nowhere.

*Scud*, why was it so *hot* in here? The sandstone walls felt like they were closing in on me. I wanted to escape, but I couldn't slip out. I'd have to crawl through the scudding doorway on my hands and knees again. What kind of message would that send?

I tried to focus on the words of the senator who was speaking, a very large kitsen with brown tufts at the ends of his ears.

“—if our most Honored One Who Was Not King were here, he would surely agree that—”

“Do not profane the name of the One Who Was Not King!” another interrupted. “In his wisdom, he would surely have said—”

Stars, they all seemed to have an opinion of what their not-king would do if he hadn't died in the battle with the delver. Did *we* kill him? We very well might have.

And when they invoked his name, they sounded uncomfortably like *me* trying to convince Vice Admiral Stoff of what Cobb would do if he were here.

Stars, was this what I sounded like? Like I was merely trying to win a scudding argument, making the specter of Cobb agree with whatever I said?

*Jorgen*, Alanik said again, *are you okay?*

*I'm fine*, I said, and I cringed, glad FM couldn't hear me.

*You aren't fine*, she'd said. *You can't be fine*.

She knew. Stars, everyone probably knew. I was trying to hold everything together, but it was all slipping through my fingers and—

*Help us!* the voice in the nowhere said again.

Stars. It didn't *sound* like Gran-Gran. Who *was* that? Didn't they know I couldn't help anyone, not my flight, not even my parents?

"Our lives are stable here," a greying kitsen said. His skin was loose around his face, and he carried a small cane that he leaned on while he sat. "Why would we risk angering the Superiority? We should be working with them, or we will end up hunted like the humans have been, and we will have no one to blame but ourselves."

Damn it. The kitsen might have easier lives than we did. They might be able to choose to go play on the beach in the afternoon, or have feasts, or duel each other needlessly because they were squabbling and bored, but if it drove them to that kind of thinking then it was a luxury that bred carelessness. My parents had wanted that kind of luxury for me, for *us*, and they'd reached for it—and that was why they were dead.

I saw my mother's face behind the glass, resigned to her fate.

*Do better than we did.*

But we weren't doing better. We were having the same damn argument *again*.

*Help us!* the voice said from the nowhere. No, *voices*. There were many of them. Maybe they weren't real. Maybe it was my own mind conjuring up all the people I was failing—Cobb and my flight and all the people on Detritus who were going to die because *I* didn't know what I was doing.

*I can't do better*, I thought to my mother. She couldn't hear me. She wasn't here with us. She wasn't in the nowhere. She wasn't anywhere. She was *gone*, and soon the rest of us would be too and it would be all my fault.

I tried to take a deep breath, but I couldn't. The room was stifling, and the walls were closing in, and that Superiority ship exploded and contracted again and again in my mind, the bits of debris flying outward into the void. There was a hollowness in my chest where my soul used to be, where the part of me that loved my parents—that cared and felt—had been kept. Now it was nothing but emptiness, and for the first time I was glad Spensa wasn't here. I didn't want her to know. I didn't want her to see. The shame of it all coiled inside me and then exploded outward like the Superiority ship—

*Boom.*



Bits of the nowhere ripped through my mind, coalescing into physical waves and bursting out like shrapnel from a bomb. The explosion caught the platforms on which Kauri and Goro were hovering and pitched them to the side, dumping the kitsen to the floor. Adi's cup tilted wildly, bits of the sides chipping off. The force of it knocked several of the kitsen in the front rows back in their seats.

Alanik grabbed me by the arm. She seemed unharmed but—

What just happened?

Snuggles and Boomslug suddenly appeared at my feet. “Boom!” Boomslug said. The senators were all staring at me, and many of them began to talk at once. The pin couldn't parse what they were all saying, but I gathered that not one of them was happy with me.

“What the scud was that?” FM asked.

“Mindblades,” Alanik said. “Jorgen, how did you—”

“I didn't mean to,” I said. “I didn't mean to.” Saints and stars, I'd just been talking about peace and now I did *this* in the middle of a diplomatic meeting?

“Boom,” Boomslug said again, and he started to nuzzle my ankle as if in sympathy.

He hadn't done this. He and Snuggles had felt it through the nowhere and had come to *comfort* me. I'd somehow manifested mindblades in the middle of a room full of scudding diplomats and now—

“Order!” Adi called. “The house will come to order!”

Goro regarded me with satisfaction. “Now you see!” he bellowed from the floor, close enough that the pin managed to pick him up. “The humans speak only the language of violence! It is the only means they'll respond to!”

I couldn't catch all of it, but several of the kitsen raised their fists in that gesture of solidarity.

Stars, I'd ruined everything. “That's not true!” I said. It came out louder than I wanted it to, my voice overpowering Adi's as she called for order.

“That's not true,” I said again, and the senators began to quiet. Several of them had scrambled over the backs of their seats to use them as shields.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” I said. “We only want you to understand that we have tools to fight the Superiority. It is possible for us to beat them, but only if we work together.”

That was a lie on two fronts. I *hadn’t* done that on purpose as a display of power and I *didn’t* know if we really had the power to defeat the Superiority, even together.

But Saints and stars, I was in it now. “I understand. It’s a lot to ask for you to side against the Superiority. I know they have better ships and better technology. But that’s been true since long before I was born, and my people have been successfully resisting them for eighty years! We don’t know anything about you or your culture, but we know about *them*, because we have fought them and we have *survived*. We don’t want what happened to us to happen to anyone else. We don’t want anyone else to be hunted, to have to live in hiding, to be killed in droves every time you so much as stick your heads out of the ground.”

The kitsen’s eyes widened as they watched me, and several of them laid their ears back in what I thought might be fear. I didn’t know if it was still me they were afraid of, or the Superiority, but I’d made this mess. I’d insisted on coming here. I’d scudding lost control in the middle of the most important diplomatic meeting I’d ever been in, and stars, I had to fix it.

“You may feel like you have peace and prosperity here, but Kauri is right. The Superiority is trying to make a deal with the delvers, and they’re going to come for anyone who opposes them. This might be our *last chance* to resist before they have the power they need to control every planet in the galaxy. How long do you think your planet will last without allies?”

FM put a hand on my arm, and I startled. Scud, was I messing this up? But beside me, she smiled and nodded.

*Keep going*, Alanik said in my mind. *You have to convince them.*

The kitsen watched me in shock, but not one of them had complained yet that I was speaking out of turn.

I didn’t know if I *could* convince them, especially after what I’d just done—stars, what had I done?—but I had to try.

“We tried to reason with the Superiority,” I said. “They offered us a treaty, and we sent a delegation to sign the deal.” My throat closed, but I spoke through it. “The Superiority offered us peace and then locked our leaders up in a ship and blew it to pieces. Half our government is gone. I *will not* fight you, because I have had enough of senseless violence and death. If you want, we will collect our people and go. But before we do, I want to offer you the opportunity to join us. The UrDail already have! The Superiority made a deal with the UrDail—and then visited their planet with a battleship bent on destroying them. This new Superiority government, that’s what they do. And if you try to reason with them, they’re going to come for you, too. And I don’t want to see it happen again. Not what happened to—”

My voice broke.

“—to my people.”

*To my parents.*

The room was so hot, but my hands felt cold. My vision blurred. I couldn’t stay here anymore. I had to get out.

“Thank you,” I said. And I stood, my neck bent to avoid hitting my head on the ceiling, then moved in a crouch down the aisle and got down on my hands and knees to crawl through the double doors out of the chamber.

The cool air hit my face, and I squinted against the bright sunlight.

I turned toward the beach, careful not to step on anyone or anything, and ran away as quickly as I dared.

## Nine

I made it almost to the water before FM caught up to me. My calves burned from moving so quickly across the sand, though I'd been out of breath since before I left the senate.

"Jorgen," she said.

I didn't turn around.

"Jorgen!" She caught me by the shoulder, spinning me around. My thoughts raced, and I felt like I could just keep spinning.

What the *scud* had I just done?

I'd shot a bunch of *mindblades* at a group of politicians. I'd sat in so many of those kinds of meetings growing up. I knew how to behave, how to hold everything in, how to present a calm front no matter what was going on inside.

*Why* did I have to go and do *that*?

"Jorgen," FM said, "this has to stop."

She was right, though I wasn't sure which "this" she meant. The part where I faked being in control, though I didn't have any idea what I was doing? This charade where we pretended we could put together alliances and fight the Superiority? Even if these people did agree to join us, what did we have to offer them? Was there any victory over an enemy this powerful? The best we could say was that so far we hadn't been exterminated completely—though until very recently I didn't think the Superiority had really been trying.

"Say something," FM said. I didn't see Alanik behind her. I wondered if she'd gone to tell the others what happened, or stayed to try to reason with the kitsen some more. She couldn't possibly do a *worse* job than I'd done—

I swore, scrubbing my hands over my face.

"Okay," FM said. "That's a good start."

I wanted to order her to go away again. I wanted to tell her I had no desire to talk about it.

But I also...*didn't*. I was drowning, and I'd brought my whole flight with me, and—

A large wave crashed onto the sand, and I jumped.

“Scud, Jorgen,” FM said. “Sit *down*.”

That was the only thing I thought myself capable of, so I did.

FM sat next to me and set Boomslug and Snuggles into the sand next to her.

“I messed that up,” I said. Stars, I was the flightleader. I wasn't supposed to admit weakness. If I had to, I was supposed to go to my superior officer so my flight wouldn't lose respect for me.

But FM had lost respect for me a long time ago, so I guessed there wasn't much to lose.

“Actually,” FM said, “I think what you said *improved* the meeting. I mean, I wouldn't have suggested that you start throwing around random cytonic powers—”

“I didn't do that on purpose,” I said.

“I know. But you got their attention, and then you gave them the speech they needed. And now they're going to have to make a decision. And if they choose to side with the Superiority...” she sighed. “Sometimes people are going to make bad choices, and there's nothing we can do about it.”

“That sucks,” I said.

“It's the worst!” FM said. “But it's not your fault.”

Scud. “We're talking about my parents now,” I said.

“Yes, we're talking about your parents!” FM said. “And don't even try to order me not to because I'm not going to listen to you this time. You are holding everything in so tightly that it *literally* exploded. We are doing this now, whether you like it or not.”

I expected to feel angry, but instead I felt...relief. Like I'd been holding up something very heavy and someone else finally saw through my assurances that I had it and took some of the weight.

That didn't make any sense though. "Talking about it isn't going to change anything," I said. "Nothing can change it."

"That's true," FM said. "And trust me, I don't like talking about these things any more than you do. But it helps, I promise. It doesn't change what happened, but it changes *you*."

I looked over at her. "You know this from experience?"

FM nodded. "Rig taught me that. Sometimes he has to *make* me talk, but every time I'm glad I did."

"You guys are really good together," I said. I would never have guessed it before they got together, but they seemed to balance each other out.

FM smiled. "Rig is my safe place," she said. "But we're not talking about me. We're talking about you, and the fact that you need to talk or you're going to explode. Again."

I ran my hands through the sand. The grains were so tiny, and some of them stuck to my fingers. "I don't even know what to say," I said.

"Okay," FM said. "I'll go first. I was terrified when that Superiority ship exploded. I thought you had died in there. That's the second time in a couple of weeks that we all thought you'd died, and it was *horrible* both times. So I would appreciate it if you'd stop doing that."

I hadn't thought about what that was like for the flight, waiting in their ships. They'd known there was a bomb. Alanik had pulled Rig in to try to disarm it.

Oh scud. "Is Rig okay?" I asked. "He knows that it wasn't his fault, right?"

FM held out a hand and wobbled it back and forth. "I mean, logically he knows. He is not an expert at defusing explosives. But he still blames himself."

I should have said something to him. I was the officer in charge of that operation, and it was my responsibility to—

"We're not talking about Rig either," FM said. "The question is, do *you* blame yourself?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't even have to think about it.

"But you know it isn't your fault, right?"

I stared out at the ocean. The sun was starting to get lower in the sky, the light over the whole landscape turning an orangey-yellow.

I didn't answer, and FM sighed. "What happened on the ship? Before the explosion."

I closed my eyes. My memories felt fractured, slowed down and sped up all at once. "We split up," I said. "I was taking fake Cobb to my parents to out him. Alanik went to release Gran-Gran. She was able to communicate with Gran-Gran, and Gran-Gran said she could sense Cobb, like, cytonically, even though she shouldn't have been able to do that."

"So something strange was going on with Gran-Gran even before they hyperjumped," FM said.

"Yeah, I guess so. Alanik also said Gran-Gran was talking about hearing voices."

Voices asking for help.

Oh *scud*.

Whatever had gone wrong with her, was it happening to me too? She'd somehow lost her powers because of it, and if I did the same—

"There's more," I said. "Those people in the tent are Gran-Gran and Cobb—at least, best as we can tell—but Gran-Gran doesn't appear to be cytonic."

"What does that mean?" FM asked.

"It means her mind isn't...visible to us in the nowhere anymore. She's lost her...vibration, I guess."

"I'll take your word for it," FM said. "That's bad, Jorgen."

"Yeah," I said. "She was fleeing a Superiority ship. Maybe it was a trap they left for anyone trying to hyperjump away? But Alanik and I didn't get caught in it."

Not yet anyway.

I remembered the strange *things* I'd felt when Alanik and I were looking for Gran-Gran and Cobb in the nowhere—the texture, like there were hundreds of beings around me, there one moment and gone the next.

There was something out there in the nowhere. Maybe it wasn't the Superiority at all. "I wonder if it's *them*," I said. "The delvers. The voices

didn't sound like I would imagine a delver—”

“Wait,” FM said. “You’ve heard them? The voices that asked for help?”

Scud. “Yeah,” I said, rubbing my hands on my knees, trying to wipe off the sand. The stuff seemed to cling to everything. I wondered if we’d ever be free of it. “I heard them in the meeting. Right before I... Right before.”

“That’s not good,” FM said. “There’s something really weird going on, and you’re all caught up in it.”

“I know,” I said.

“And that’s the only reason I’ve let us get sidetracked for this long. You were telling me about what happened on the ship. You told me all about what happened to Alanik...”

“I went to find my parents,” I said. “It took me a while, because the ship was big and I took some wrong turns. Eventually fake Cobb got away from me and ran off. He seemed really eager to get out of there, though I didn’t know why until Alanik told me about the bomb.”

“Right,” FM said.

“By the time I found my parents, they were trapped in this room in the center of the ship. I could see them through the glass but it wouldn’t break, and all the doors were sealed shut.”

I saw my father’s face through the glass, his resignation when the Superiority announced they were going to be exterminated. My mother yelling at me to leave them, to escape, to save myself.

“The Superiority announced they were going to kill them,” I said. “Alanik and I tried to find a way to get them out, but there wasn’t one.”

“That’s not your fault,” FM said. “You had minutes at best, like Rig. You weren’t prepared for that and it isn’t your fault. The Superiority did this, not you.”

“My mother told me to go, but I didn’t. I wouldn’t listen to Alanik either. And right before Alanik pulled me out, my mother spoke to me through the glass—she said to do better than they did.”

“Stars,” FM said. “No wonder you feel pressure to stay in control of everything.”



I didn't want to be in control. I just wanted to make sure the DDF was in the hands of someone who would keep our people safe.

"I didn't want to leave them," I said. "If Alanik hadn't pulled me out, I would have died there."

FM closed her eyes. "Thank the stars for Alanik then."

I couldn't say this next part. I couldn't bring myself to form the words, especially not to FM.

*Maybe it would have been easier if I had died there.*

I looked out over the ocean.

I couldn't think like that. My flight needed me. *Cobb* needed me. We had to figure out how to reverse whatever the Superiority or the delvers had done to him and get him back in charge of the DDF.

FM was right. My parents' deaths weren't my fault. But all the ways I was failing everyone now, falling apart when I should have been leading—

That was squarely on my head.

I stood up and brushed sand off my flight suit.

"You aren't done talking," FM said.

"Yes," I said. "I am." I couldn't sit here being useless. Maybe FM was right. Maybe talking could change how I felt, but it didn't do anything to help everyone else.

I couldn't indulge in that. I couldn't be useless. I'd already lost Spensa, lost my parents.

I couldn't let it happen again, not to anyone else.

"Maybe for *now*," FM said. "We'll talk more later."

Scud. I'd answered her questions. Wasn't that enough?

I was almost glad to see Alanik headed my way with Nedd and Arturo. Juno floated along farther behind them. I didn't want to answer their questions either, but at least they weren't going to probe me about my feelings, especially in front of the kitsen.

"Dude," Nedd said when they drew near. "Did you seriously *explode*?"

"Shut up, Nedd," Arturo said. "But, did you?"

"I already told you what happened," Alanik said, looking annoyed. "You didn't believe me?"

“We believe you,” Nedd said. “We’re just incredulous.”

“That word literally means ‘unable to believe,’” Alanik said. “Is there a translation error, or are you making fun of me?”

“Neither,” FM said. “They’re just idiots.”

“Yeah, it’s true,” I said.

“That they’re idiots?” Alanik asked.

“Sometimes,” I said. “But I did...explode.”

“That is *awesome*,” Nedd said. “I mean, not the part where you threw around deadly mind weapons at a political summit. That seems bad.”

“Bad” didn’t begin to cover it, but there was also something off about it. Juno finally caught up to us, which was good, because I wanted his opinion on this.

“Why didn’t I hurt anyone?” I asked. “When I startled Boomslug, he cut me up.”

“Your mindblades are ill-formed,” Juno said. “You need training to make them sharper, stronger.”

“I don’t *want* them to be sharper,” I said. “I could have killed somebody.”

I waited for one of them to tell me I was being overdramatic.

They didn’t.

“When Kauri said you wanted to learn about the shadow-walkers,” Juno said, “she didn’t tell me you *were* one. I have spent my life studying their texts, their lore, their ancient wisdom. You have strength, but you need control, and I can teach you if you will consent to be taught.”

“What about your senate?” I asked. “Will they allow it?”

“The senate has taken a recess,” Alanik said. “They want to think about the things you said, and then they’re going to convene in the morning to make a decision. In the meantime, they say we’re free to transport Cobb and Gran-Gran home to Detritus.”

“Okay,” I said. “We need to take care of that first.”

“I can handle the transport,” Alanik said. “You can go with Juno, as long as you promise to fill me in on what you’ve learned later.”

“Okay,” I said. “You hyperjump Gran-Gran and Cobb to Platform Prime with the medical crew.” Hopefully Cobb and Gran-Gran would recover faster with our medical resources at home. Then they could tell us what had happened to Gran-Gran’s powers. I turned to Arturo and Nedd. “You two help her get them there safely.”

“Of course,” Arturo said. “We’ve got this.” And they all headed toward the hospital tent.

“I’ll go check on the others,” FM said. “And see what kind of accommodations we can find for the night. We may have to sleep in our starships, but I guess Spensa did that for most of flight school, so it can’t be too bad.”

She walked away, leaving me alone on the beach with Juno, who hovered up until he was at eye level with me.

“I have studied mindblades all my life,” Juno said, “but I had never seen them before today. Tell me, human. What you did, was it a stunt? A display of power? Were you trying to intimidate them?”

“No,” I said. “I just...lost control.”

“If I may ask,” Juno said, “control of *what*?”

I blinked at him. “Of myself,” I said. “Of...”

Of this unstoppable, unknowable force that wanted to rip its way out of me. I’d been taught all my life to feel shame for the defect, never to speak of it. I’d spent so long wishing I could keep up with Spensa, with Alanik, wishing I wasn’t so hopeless at using my powers—wishing I could harness them to protect the people I loved.

But somehow I’d still never made this connection: I was *dangerous*.

“I want to learn how to control them,” I said.

“Good, then,” Juno said. “Come with me, and we’ll see what we can do.”

# Ten

“Breathe in, breathe out,” Juno said. “You are now completely relaxed.”

I was far from completely relaxed. I sat cross-legged on top of the cliff above Dreamspring while Juno hovered on his platform in front of me, reading from a book that he said contained the ancient exercises used by kitsen cytonics. He’d changed into a set of power armor that covered every part of him except his ears, his eyes, and his nose. The terrain up here was rough and rocky, the orange stone warm beneath me. We’d chosen this location because the tops of the cliffs were unpopulated; if I managed to produce a mindblade, there was no one around to be hurt by it but Juno, and he swore it was his sacred responsibility to put himself into the line of fire.

I didn’t know how much his armor would help against a mindblade, but he’d insisted on wearing it anyway.

And it did look badass, I’d give him that.

“I thought this was supposed to focus on mindblades,” I said. “Not breathing.”

“Patience,” Juno said. “According to the wisdom of the ancients, in order to achieve control, you must first accept that you have none by bringing yourself into alignment with the will of the universe.”

“I can’t both achieve control *and* have none. That’s ridiculous.”

“It is the way of the shadow-walkers,” Juno said. “It is the way the ancients channeled their power, and the way that you must channel yours.”

I sighed, interrupting the “continuous breathing” that Juno insisted I try. That didn’t make sense to me either—I was pretty sure every creature with lungs used “continuous breathing” to stay alive, so why was that something I needed to practice? Spensa had figured out how to hyperjump and Alanik could do it with ease, and I was pretty sure extra “continuous breathing” had not been involved.

Then again, it wasn't any *more* ridiculous than kneading bread while wearing a blindfold, and that had been oddly helpful.

*It changes you*, FM had said. I still wasn't sure I'd done a great job of talking, but maybe I could be better at this. Breathing was easy, so what did I have to complain about?

"Let's begin again," Juno said. "Close your eyes." And instead of telling him this was a waste of my time, I did.

"See yourself walking along a beach," Juno said. "With each breath, the waves wash in, and the waves wash out."

Less than a day ago, I would have had no idea what Juno was talking about. But now I *could* picture myself on the beach. I could practically hear the churning of the ocean, the strangely mechanical white noise produced by so much water moving at once.

"Feel the wind on your skin," Juno said. "The heat of the sun as it burns down from above. Hear the sounds of the waves as they lap upon the shore. Smell the salt in the air and the rotting of the seaweed washed up on the beach as it slowly decays."

"That's disgusting," I said.

"Yes," Juno said. "But it is the method of the ancients. And you're not supposed to speak during the exercise."

"Sorry," I said.

"You walk forward and stand in the ocean. Feel the water as it washes against your feet. The temperature is pleasant, not too warm, and not too cool."

If Spensa were listening to this, she would embellish on it.

I laughed.

"Is something funny?"

"No," I said. "Just imagining the ocean running red with the blood of my enemies."

Juno sounded startled. "Is that some kind of...cytonic premonition?"

"Nope," I said. "A memory of my girlfriend. Never mind. Go on."

"The waves wash against your legs once...twice...three times. Feel the pull of the ocean current as it tugs on your feet. Your mind is the ocean,

flowing from this realm to the next, drawing close and then away again. Let your mind slip outward like the tide, into the vast ocean of nothingness that surrounds you.”

Scud, my mind did slip into the nowhere as easily as he said. In and out, like the tide. The longer I pictured it, the easier it was to do.

I didn’t want to be in the nowhere. That was where the voices came from, and that strange texture, the presence that felt like so many beings all crowding in on me. Either or both could be the eyes, but they *felt* different. Not as menacing. Friendly even—

“As the wave of your mind washes into this dimension, it carries with it a bit of the nowhere. Shards of nothing ride atop the wave, washing into the somewhere, each of them *becoming* only for a moment, then fading away.”

I could feel them. The fragments of nowhere, the little bits of nothing following my mind into the somewhere. They had to take form—everything in this world had form, while that world was the absence of it.

A presence pressed in on my mind—Alanik working with the medtechs to transport Cobb and Gran-Gran. She might return with orders from Stoff calling us back to Detritus, so I needed to concentrate and learn while I still could.

“Observe the fragments as they emerge. Notice their shape and their texture. Draw them forth from your memory.”

The fragments *did* have a shape. My mind skipped over the nowhere like a stone on a pond, and each time it made contact the fragments of nothing broke off. They were shaped like crystals, oblong with crisp, faceted sides. I couldn’t hold them so much as *glimpse* them.

“Picture their shapes in your mind, and begin to mold them. Will them to alter their form little by little, growing sharper, larger, stronger. The fragments are you, and you are the fragments. They bend to your will, as you bend your will to the vibrations of the universe.”

I didn’t what it meant that I *was* the fragments, but I focused on them, trying to change their shape. And they *did* change, as if they weren’t bits of nothing at all, but pieces of my mind—energy that was scattering and

dissipating while I made contact with the nowhere. My whole body tensed as the fragments got sharper.

“When you are ready, bring your mind into alignment with them. Feel their rhythm; align your vibration to theirs. You are them, and they are you. You are as one—neither exerting control over the other—of one mind, one will, and one spirit.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I said.

Juno cleared his throat. “Do you want me to read it again?”

“Okay.” Though I wasn’t sure I was going to understand it any better the second time.

“I will admit, when I imagined having the opportunity to guide the meditations of a shadow-walker, I had not envisioned quite so many interruptions.”

“Sorry,” I said.

As Juno read, I tried to focus on the vibration of the fragments—were they really my own mind?—flying out of the nowhere. I worried about what they might do if I tried to move them, especially since I didn’t have any idea how to align my *will* with them.

But I needed to try. I touched the fragments lightly, and—*Oh*. I opened my eyes, sensing a fragment flying off over the cliff, cutting through the breeze before it dissipated. “I think I did it,” I said.

The sky above us was turning a deep shade of indigo, but over the water it was a bright yellow, which faded into orange and then pink. A sunset. I’d seen paintings of those, but they’d failed to capture the beauty. And here I had been keeping my eyes closed.

I hoped the rest of my flight was watching it at least.

“We came up here because you would not harm anything if you succeeded in manifesting the blades,” Juno said. “Now I see the folly in it. We cannot tell if you’ve manifested them, because there is nothing for you to manipulate but me.”

That wasn’t entirely true.

“Hang on,” I said, and I turned around—scud, now I was facing *away* from the sunset. But if this worked, it would be worth it.

“Read to me again,” I said. “The part about the continuous breathing.”

Juno started the meditation over, and I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my surroundings, to skim the surface of the nowhere with my mind, until I could feel the fragments appearing and scattering. I focused on them, molding them into tiny points, like blades of grass I’d seen in paintings of Old Earth. I reached out, touching the fragments lightly with my mind.

And then I pushed them down, shoving them out away from my feet.

A sound, like marbles hitting sandstone.

I opened my eyes.

Scud, I’d *scratched* the stone in front of me, leaving gouges in it.

“Shadow-walker,” Juno said. “It seems the meditation has worked.”

It seemed it had. “Let me try that again,” I said.

Juno read to me from his meditations, and each time I aimed with the strange shards of nowhere the grooves in the sandstone grew deeper, until I was cutting deep gashes no wider than my index finger.

“Do you have more of those meditations in your books?” I asked.

“Many more,” Juno said. “Entire volumes, in fact.”

If Stoff decided to pull us home, maybe I could use that knowledge as an excuse to stay, at least until Alanik and I could learn more about how to use our powers. We were the best weapons the DDF had right now, but we needed more training. A lot more.

“Thank you, Juno,” I said.

“It has been my pleasure, shadow-walker.”

It was strange for him to call me that, since I didn’t *walk* anywhere. I wondered if he had a meditation in his book that could teach me to hyperjump.

“Let’s try it again,” I said, walking over to a fresh section of the cliff. “I want to see how deep I can make the shards—”

I slipped into the nowhere, and immediately a voice entered my mind. *We hear you*, it said.

Scud. Was that the delvers? It didn’t *feel* terrifying, but—

*Help us!* it said. *We hear you.*

They didn’t sound menacing. They sounded...desperate. Scared.



*I don't know how to help you, I said.*

"Is something wrong?" Juno asked.

"I can hear someone," I said. "Someone asking for my help."

*Jorgen?* a voice said. I recognized that one.

*Gran-Gran!* Was she awake now? *You have your powers back?*

*I... What?*

*Your powers,* I said. *Are you awake? Did they disappear while you were asleep somehow?*

*Not a lot of time,* Gran-Gran said. *Hard to concentrate, but you need to... help us...*

Her voice faded, and while I called her name again into the nowhere, she didn't respond.

*Jorgen,* Alanik said. *We need you at the medical tent. You need to see this.*

She sounded urgent, so I didn't ask questions. "Excuse me," I said to Juno. "I want to learn more, but my people need me."

"Of course," Juno said.

I called to Snuggles, who was waiting again in my ship. She appeared in my arms. "Take me to Alanik," I said, sending Snuggles a picture.

"Alanik!" Snuggles said.

Juno, the cliff, and the melting remains of the sunset all disappeared.

## Eleven

Snuggles and I passed by the eyes and jumped to the front of the medical tent, where the medtechs had loaded Cobb and Gran-Gran onto stretchers. Nedd and Arturo each stood at the foot of one of the stretchers, with Kel and Winnow at the heads. I sent Snuggles immediately back to Boomslug in my ship.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Alanik.

“We started moving them over to the ship,” Winnow said, indicating to where the transport shuttle was waiting down by the water. “But as we took them farther from the tent, they started to deteriorate.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Blood pressure dropped,” Kel said. “Heart rates became irregular. What’s strange is that it happened to *both* of them at more or less the same time.”

“Why would that happen?” I asked.

“I can’t explain it,” Kel said. “Even weirder is they stabilized as soon as we brought them back here.”

“It’s like they don’t want to be away from here,” Winnow said. “We wanted to load them in the ship first so we wouldn’t jostle them when we hyperjump—”

“If their condition is linked to this place then we definitely can’t hyperjump them,” I said. “But why would it matter if they’re *here*?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Winnow said. “But my professional judgment is that we don’t move a patient if moving changes their condition for the worse.”

“Can you treat them here?”

Winnow nodded. “We may need to go home for some equipment. But for the moment we can get them comfortable.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Arturo stepped up beside me. “What do you think is going on?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I slipped into the nowhere, listening, but the only cytonic I felt nearby was Alanik. “Gran-Gran’s powers still seem to be gone. But I *heard* her in the nowhere.”

“Really?” Alanik asked.

“Yeah. Hang on. Let me—”

I focused, returning to the imaginary ocean from the meditation. Instead of focusing on the fragments—which I now realized splintered off every time I touched the nowhere—I listened, trying to hear her again.

*Gran-Gran?*

No response. I tried to push farther, listening closer...

And then I felt the texture again, the strange sensation of *bumps*, hundreds of them—maybe thousands—all over and around the island. One minute Alanik and I were alone, and then there were so *many* of them.

What *were* those?

I shook myself, dropping my link to the nowhere. “Do you *feel* that?” I asked Alanik. “Those...weird ridges?”

“No,” Alanik said. “And I don’t hear Gran-Gran either. You’re sure it was her?”

I was sure. If this Gran-Gran didn’t have powers, but *another* Gran-Gran was talking to me from the nowhere, did that mean she was lost in there like Spensa somehow? I’d assumed Spensa’s body had gone with her when she left, but I hadn’t asked, and maybe she wouldn’t even know.

Juno had finally caught up to me, his disc floating toward us from the cliff face.

“Juno,” I called to him. “Do you know anything about shadow-walkers projecting their spirits into the nowhere without their bodies?”

“The soul is made up of the body and the mind,” Juno said. “Your mind enters the nowhere whenever you interact with it. Only when you hyperjump does your body follow.”

“Sure,” I said. “But can the mind end up *stuck* in the nowhere without the body to follow it?”

“I have not read of it happening,” Juno said. “Not in all the books of lore.”

“It wouldn’t explain this anyway,” Alanik said. “When your mind goes into the negative realm, your body remains and continues to resonate cytonically. Otherwise we would stop being able to sense each other every time we communicated through the negative realm. Why would your body stop resonating if your mind was stuck?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I wonder if it has something to do with the voices Gran-Gran was hearing before she hyperjumped.” The voices I was hearing now. Scud, I did not want to end up in a mysterious coma. “Something went wrong in the jump, and it’s still possible that she’s stuck somehow.” Though I didn’t know why she would have stopped talking to me. She said it was difficult somehow...

“Juno,” I said. “Can you show me where Cobb and Gran-Gran first came through the nowhere?”

“Of course,” Juno said. “They were found in the burrow that once belonged to our master shadow-walkers. Now it is our library, the home of our lore.”

In a *library*? That seemed...unhelpful. But still... “I’d like to see it,” I said. “Alanik, will you come with us?”

“Of course,” Alanik said. She seemed confused about why I’d want to see it, but she didn’t argue.

“FM said we’re camping on the beach tonight,” Nedd said. “Because there are no kitsen buildings big enough to hold all of us. We’ll go see about setting up camp.”

The sky was rapidly growing dark now that the last sliver of the sun had finished setting. The horizon over the ocean had turned a rosy shade of pink, but over the cliffs I could make out the first of the stars.

“Thank you,” I said to Nedd, and I followed Juno as he led Alanik and me toward the library.

Unlike the elevated burrows of the rest of Dreamspring, the library was set down in a kind of crater, deep beneath the sandstone cliff. We descended a set of tiny stairs, and Alanik and I pressed our hands against the sandstone

walls, resting our feet on three or four steps at a time, using them more for traction than as stairs. As we moved I felt that cytonic resonance I'd detected earlier growing stronger. We were heading toward something important.

We descended far enough down that if the waves were to lap this far, they'd surely fill the basin. But they must not ever reach this part of the island if the library had remained intact for so long.

We had to crawl through the ornate arched doorway after Juno, but the library itself was several levels tall, which allowed Alanik and me to stand with a meter of headroom to spare. The room was filled with tables barely above ankle height, and I was careful where I stepped, so as not to disturb any of the cushions set around them or the carts covered in books and scrolls.

Along three of the walls were shelves covered in books, all of them smaller than the palm of my hand. Ladders scaled the walls, which were lined with railed walkways for perusing the rows of shelves, though several of the acclivity stone platforms also waited at the entrance of the room to provide ease of access.

It was the fourth wall though that caught my attention.

It was a stone wall, smooth and polished, with rows and rows of lines carved into it in a strange, almost technological design. The wall radiated a power that was undeniably cytonic, and something about it felt familiar.

"This is where you found them?" I asked Juno.

"Yes," Juno said, hovering in the doorway on his platform. "Over there, by the scroll case. They appeared lying side-by-side on top of some tables."

Alanik picked her way across the room and examined the wall, which stretched all the way to the relatively high ceiling. She pressed her hand to the lines on the wall. "I've never seen anything like this," she said.

Neither had I, but I swore I'd heard of a wall like this.

Oh, *scud*.

Now I remembered where.

"Alanik, step away from the wall," I said.

She looked over her shoulder at me like I was crazy, but she did as I asked, working her way past the rows of tables littered with books.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I think...I think it’s a portal,” I said. “An entrance to the nowhere. Spensa told me there’s one in the caverns of Detritus. She said we should search for it—but that we needed to be careful, because a cytonic could fall through and get stuck there like she did.” We had teams looking for it, but I hadn’t heard if they’d found anything.

Alanik suddenly looked alarmed. “What does that mean?” she asked. “If Gran-Gran hyperjumped, she shouldn’t have had to use a physical portal. There wasn’t one like this on the Superiority ship.”

“I don’t know what it means,” I said. “But Gran-Gran heard voices asking for help before she jumped, right? And I’ve been hearing them too.”

Alanik squinted at me. “Voices from the negative realm?”

“Maybe,” I said. I concentrated, listening for them again. “Juno, you said this used to be the burrow where your master cytonics lived. What happened to them?”

“They met in a great summit to compile the vast knowledge of our people,” Juno said. “During the summit, they simply disappeared, leaving behind only these strange symbols.” He gestured to the wall. “Beyond that we don’t know, as there was no one left to write down the history.”

There wouldn’t be, if they all disappeared at once. My people had lost knowledge the same way. After the crash of the Defiant fleet, the first lifebuster bomb dropped by the Superiority had killed all the officers, the entire command staff—everyone who knew what had happened and why. We were left to make up our own stories about the “Krell.”

Thanks to Spensa though, I had a hunch as to what might have happened. “They left this wall behind,” I said, “because the summit was here? In this room?”

“Yes,” Juno said. “This city has been our capital for centuries, so it was a natural meeting place.”

“If they decided to try out their knowledge,” I said, “they might have figured out how to create this portal into the nowhere and then gotten

trapped inside.”

“If that is so,” Juno said, “I’m afraid they should have died many years ago.”

That was true, but I’d heard *something* in the nowhere. I focused on the portal. I couldn’t hear the voices at the moment—not Gran-Gran’s or the others.

They were asking for help. Gran-Gran had heard them—she’d spent so many years trapped on Detritus, listening to the stars. If anyone could have honed their skills at detecting signals in the nowhere no one else could hear, it was her.

“Did Spensa tell you how to open it?” Alanik asked.

“No,” I said. “And I haven’t been able to reach her again these last few days, so I can’t ask.” I turned to Juno. “Are there legends of what happened to the cytonics?” If there was any truth in them, there might be some clue as to how to reach the kitsen cytonics—and Gran-Gran, who had been lost chasing after them.

“Oh, many,” Juno said. “Most of them are children’s tales. My favorite involves a band of space pirates who flew through the skies on the back of an enormous turtle.”

“Space pirates stole your cytonics?”

“Almost certainly not,” Juno said. “I said it was my favorite, not the most accurate.”

“Which would you say is the most accurate?” I asked.

“It’s impossible to say for certain, of course,” Juno said. “But I’ve always given credence to the theories of Ito, who wrote that—”

“Jorgen!” Arturo’s voice came from the handheld radio clipped to my belt.

“Yes?” I responded.

“Superiority carrier ship,” Arturo said. “There are fighters headed this way.”

*Scud.* The Superiority. I’d hoped they hadn’t heard Kauri’s signal and didn’t realize we were here.

Apparently I was wrong. “We have to go,” I told Alanik.

“If you are going to use your new skills against the enemy,” Juno said, “perhaps I could accompany you.”

I didn’t know if I was ready for that, but a kitsen wouldn’t take up much space in my cockpit. Even less than the slugs, though I hoped he didn’t want to cuddle as close. “Okay,” I said. I called to Snuggles, and she appeared instantly on my shoulder with Boomslug in tow, because she couldn’t seem to go anywhere without him anymore.

I put one hand on Alanik’s shoulder and one on Juno’s platform and asked Snuggles to hyperjump us all to the beach.



## Twelve

The carrier ship loomed in the sky above Dreamspring, illuminated by the ivory-colored moon peeking over the horizon. The ship sat directly above the city, ringed by puffs of clouds. It looked out of place over the idyllic landscape.

“They are here for you?” Juno asked. He didn’t sound like he blamed us. He was simply gathering the facts.

“Probably,” I said. We’d brought this down on the kitsen. It was our responsibility to do what we could to protect them.

I didn’t have to give the order for my flight to get to their ships. They were already running. I kept my hands on Alanik’s shoulder and Juno’s platform and directed Snuggles to hyperjump us to FM’s fighter. “We need to release the taynix,” I said. “We might need them to retrieve the others.” I raised FM’s canopy and released Gill, and then Alanik and I raced between the ships, opening the boxes. When we finished, I had Snuggles hyperjump Juno and me straight to my cockpit.

Alanik ran for her ship, while Juno took up position right behind my seat. We lifted off as four enemy ships swooped in overhead.

The rest of the flight were still running. We needed to provide air support or they were going to get gunned down before they got into the air.

*Cover me*, I said to Alanik.

*Got it*, Alanik responded.

I flew straight at the enemy ships, opening fire so they had to scatter or lose their shields. Juno gave a little squeak of surprise, like he hadn’t expected the fighter to...what? Fight?

Alanik got a few good shots on the ships as they rolled, and then followed on my wing as I pursued the ships long enough to draw their fire and lead them out over the ocean away from the beach.

“Well, that was exciting,” Juno said. He seemed to have affixed the boots of his power armor to his hovering disc so he wouldn’t go flying off as I accelerated.

“You haven’t seen anything.” *Circle around and cover the others*, I told Alanik, and she peeled away and shot at one of the enemy ships, which had also turned back.

For all Alanik’s talk about proving yourself in combat, she fit effortlessly into the flight and never argued when I gave her orders.

“Jerkface,” Arturo said over the radio, “the others are getting in their ships now, but Quirk and Sentry are pinned down over by where we had that feast.”

“Got it,” I said. “Angel, cover the others until they get in their ships, then back me up.” I darted off down the beach, immediately spotting the ship Arturo was talking about. It was peppering the rock with destructor fire, and I hoped Kimmalyn and Sadie had found good cover. I opened fire, getting in one good hit before the ship went into a bank, then rolled and returned fire. I flew beneath the ship, forcing it to turn again and keep its attention on me. Once I had it, I threw my ship into a wave sequence, evading its fire, leading that ship out over the ocean again.

I caught the attention of two more tails. Arturo and Nedd were both in their ships now, circling over the area where Kimmalyn and Sadie had been pinned down.

“Amphi,” I said, “how are Quirk and Sentry?”

“Climbing out of an oven, it looks like,” Arturo said.

“How clever,” Juno said behind me.

“They’re coated in soot,” Arturo said. “We can cover them to their ships.”

“I’ve got it,” I said. Kimmalyn and Sadie couldn’t call to their slugs, but I could let the slugs know where they were. I sent Cheeky and Happy a mental image of the oven area. I felt the slugs hyperjump to the ovens, and then to the ships.

“They’re here!” FM said. “Very dirty, but they appear to be fine.”

“Good,” I said. “Everyone sound off when you’re in the air.”

My three tails were trying to catch me in their crossfire, and I darted through another defensive sequence while the flight sounded off. Instinct took over while I kept mental track, making sure no one was missing.

“Is someone helping Jerkface?” Kimmalyn asked over the radio.

“I’ve got it,” I said. My tails were right behind me, all three targeting me at once, though I still had my shield and they were firing wildly.

“This might be a good time to try a meditative exercise,” Juno said.

“How do you figure?” I asked, going into a barrel roll. Juno’s platform tipped to the side, and he let out a little squeak that sounded suspiciously like a *whoop*.

The others were all in their ships now, so I didn’t have to worry about leading the enemy away. I didn’t want to encourage the enemy to fire on the kitsen city, but I also didn’t want to leave the city alone for too long and have it get blasted in our absence. I didn’t know what the Superiority’s orders were, so we had to plan for anything.

“Remember the fragments,” Juno said. “Your breathing.”

“I’m busy,” I said.

Juno continued as if he hadn’t heard me. “Breathe in, breathe out. You are now completely relaxed.”

I was not at all relaxed. I’d seen the biofeedback reports, tests where the DDF tracked our vitals even on routine flights. We functioned on pure adrenaline up here. “Juno,” I said. “I don’t think—”

“You are a stone, skipping on the sea,” he said, and I remembered that sensation, the skimming across the nowhere. The vibration I felt along the boundary between this world and the nowhere was not unlike the vibration of my ship as it cut through the sky.

“I can’t manifest mindblades inside my ship,” I said. “I could cut the ship to pieces.” Slices of metal curling outward, flying away from each other in a giant burst.

“Boom,” Boomslug said.

“Right,” I said. “No booms. Not here.”

“Not here,” Boomslug agreed.

The enemy ships were still on my tail, and I evaded their fire and swung around parallel to the beach. If I brought them back, I could—

“Jerkface, you okay?” Arturo asked.

“Fine,” I said. “Get the rest of the flight in offensive formation.” I couldn’t get a good view of the battlefield without giving an opening to my tails, so Arturo would have to manage it. He was capable. He could handle it without me.

“Ah, here it is,” Juno said, flipping through the pages of the book. “Return to the ocean. Stand with your feet in the water. You are a part of it, as it is a part of you.”

I could hear Arturo over the radio, giving instructions to the rest of the flight. He had Nedd supporting Kimmalyne while he and Alanik came after me. “Juno,” I said. “I really don’t think—”

“As the wave of your mind washes into this dimension, it carries with it shards of the nowhere. Feel them fly from the surface of the ocean of nothing. The shards are far from you, farther than your reach. They are not shards at all, but birds, growing wings, flying far, reaching into the beyond, cutting everything in their path with their razor-sharp beaks.”

Scud, I could see them, the shards, the *birds*. They flew along the edge of the nowhere like the ones I’d seen dodging over the waves earlier. I jogged my ship to the side to avoid a blast of destructor fire and completed my loop, heading for the beach. “You know if I mess this up, we’re going to fall out of the sky, right?” Snuggles could hyperjump us out, but I’d lose my ship and this was not the moment for that.

“Feel the birds fly away from you, the flock sailing toward your enemies, their beaks sharp and ready.”

Scud, was he going to keep reading this until I tried it? On my proximity sensors I could see more ships reaching the beach, engaging the rest of my flight. We couldn’t call for backup immediately. Either Alanik or I would have to go to Detritus retrieve them, so we needed to exhaust our other options first.

“All right,” I said. “Fine. I’ll deploy the birds.”

I shot upward toward a low-flying cloud. Alanik said these things would be fine to fly into, and we'd been watching them pass over all day without incident, so I didn't think there was anything nefarious hiding within. Using the cloud for cover, I executed an Ahlstrom loop and then watched on my proximity monitor for the ships to enter after me. They kept chasing me, but I used the cover to shake them off, coming out the bottom and banking hard toward the beach.

Arturo and Alanik caught up, showering my tails with fire.

"Amphi, Angel, back off," I said. "I'm going to try something."

I didn't want to close my eyes, not in the air. But I let my mind disconnect, flying by instinct. It was dangerous to do with three tails and with my backup dropping away like I'd asked them to. I might not have more than a moment, but I reached into the ocean of the nowhere and caught those fragments, forming them into birds that flew forward like missiles, their wings tucked against their bodies, their beaks sharp and ready.

One of the enemy fighters got a hit on my shield, and then another. I launched into a twin-scissor to avoid the fire, still trying to split my mind, to focus on the fragments.

"You are the birds, and the birds are you," Juno read. "You and the birds are one. You are one with the nowhere, and with yourself."

I zipped away, my tails still following me. "Everybody stay back," I said, and I slowed, nearly letting the enemy catch me.

My shield took one more hit and disappeared. I reached out for my flock of projectile birds.

And like tiny ships, I flew them into the enemies behind me.

The pilots didn't dodge. They never saw it coming. The mindblades tore through their wings and hulls, ignoring their shields, taking them apart. In my mind the fragments scattered and dissipated. The chunks of ship fell over the ocean, pieces of metal cleanly cut apart from each other.

Over the radio, Arturo swore.

"What was *that*?" Nedd said.

"Mindblades," FM said. "By the stars, Jerkface, that was incredible!"

My own ship was fine. I was almost surprised.

“I can’t believe that worked,” I said to Juno.

Juno made a self-satisfied little noise. “The lore of the ancients contains much wisdom.”

Apparently it did.

“Fine,” Alanik said over the radio. “You were right. You don’t need to fly out front to prove yourself.”

“Listen to her, Jerkface,” Nedd said. “Fall back and leave some for the rest of us.”

“Gladly,” I said. I took cover by the cliffs while I reignited my shield. Kimmalyn hovered above me, watching my back. While I waited I extended my sensors, taking stock of the enemy ships as the others engaged them. There were many of them, but not *overwhelmingly* many, and they seemed to be firing only on us, not the kitsen.

At least so far. I expected that meant they had come looking to eliminate us, not necessarily to destroy the kitsen for harboring us. That could turn very quickly, but I imagined that convincing the kitsen to help us if we were the only ones under attack was going to be—

Two ships bore down on us, and Kimmalyn tipped her nose in their direction—

The ships soared over our heads, and a new voice shouted over the radio. “Invaders!” it said, the words translated out of the sharp kitsen language by my pin. “Do you think to mar our beautiful home with your vulgar presence? We will cut you down where you stand, and you will regret the day you set foot on the Den of Everlasting Light Which Laps Gently upon the Shores of Time!”

Was that— “Goro?”

“Human,” Goro said. “I offer you a temporary reprieve from my challenge.”

At least that tirade wasn’t aimed at us then.

“I don’t have one of those pin things,” Catnip said. “Anyone want to translate for the fox-dude?”

“He’s offering to let Jerkface out of fighting him,” FM said. “Not that he agreed to fight him in the first place.”

I hoped this wasn’t another trap. Goro could offer to help us, only to turn around and use the fact that we’d fired at the Superiority as evidence of our savagery. “We are *defending ourselves*,” I said over the radio.

“Of course!” Goro went on. “You have proven yourself a coward in one-on-one combat, but many who are cowardly with the sword show their courage when they step into a ship!”

*Stars*. “I’m not a *coward* because I refuse to kick around someone one-tenth of my—”

“If you were to face my champion in combat you would bleed like the Red Rivers That Lead to the Empty Sea!”

“You shouldn’t let him bait you,” Juno said. “I think at this point he’s doing it for sport.”

I was glad one of us was enjoying it. “Goro,” I said, “we’re defending ourselves, and your people as well. The Superiority were willing to turn on the UrDail for harboring us, and they’ll do the same to you.”

I winced. That might not have been the best thing to say—that we’d knowingly put them in danger by coming here. But we couldn’t go *anywhere* without putting people in danger, and we needed to—

“This is your opportunity to prove yourself, human,” Goro said. “If you are defending the sacred cliffs of Dreamspring, then you are already our allies. Our ship might not be as fast as yours, but she is no less fierce. We will fight by your side as equals.”

*Oh*. That sounded more like an...opportunity. If we flew together, fought together, he might begin to believe that we truly intended to be their allies and not their conquerors. FM continued to translate for the others, catching most of the gist. Our response was up to me.

“Excellent,” I said to Goro. “We are pleased to fight by your side.”

“Jerkface,” Arturo said. “Another large group of fighters has left the carrier ship, headed this way.”

“*Jerkface*?” Goro said. “My shipboard translator interprets that as—”

“It’s not what it sounds like,” Alanik said. “Just go with it.”

“Goro,” I said, “are there other ships that could fight with us?” I widened my sensors to get a look at the incoming ships. Scud. “We’re badly outnumbered.”

“We’re here!” Kauri said, cutting in over the radio. “And there’s a small airfield on the other side of the island. The Air Force That Does Not Belong to He Who Was Not King should be joining us soon.”

Stars. “Your names are so long,” I said to Juno. “Aren’t your people ever in a hurry?”

“We shorten them often,” Juno said. “We use the full names when we want to impress or intimidate.”

Ah, okay. That made more sense. And an influx of kitsen ships could only be a good thing.

“Skyward Flight, let’s push the ships away from the city. FM, Sentry, you two take up the rearguard. We don’t know what the enemy target is, and I don’t want civilians getting hit while our backs are turned.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” FM said.

I didn’t command the kitsen, and I couldn’t act like I did. “Goro and Kauri, if you fly with us, we’ll protect your gunships while you shoot down the incoming enemy. Is that strategy acceptable to you?”

“The enemy’s faces will glisten with tears as they know the honor of being defeated by the *Ever-Glorious Crashing Waves of Time!*”

I took that as a yes.

“Is that...the name of your ship?” Kimmalyn asked.

“Yes, treacherous human,” Goro said.

So he hadn’t entirely given up on baiting us.

“I’m calling you *Crashing Wave*,” I said. “Unless that offends you?”

“If I am calling you Jerkface, I believe the offense is to you, human.”

“Yeah, probably,” I said. My parents had been on me to change my callsign ever since I finished flight school. I should probably do it now out of respect. If I said that was why, no one would question it.

But the real reason I’d kept it wasn’t because I wanted to defy my parents. I *liked* my callsign. Spensa had given it to me, and it reminded me of her. I wasn’t going to change it.



Especially not now.

My flight pushed toward the new ships and I flew out to join them, watching their approach. The Superiority forces were inconsistently trained, and this batch looked like they hadn't been in ships for long. Some of the Superiority groups seemed to have flightleaders, but these weren't following any specific formation. If they had leaders, they didn't know what they were doing.

My flight divided into three groups—a rearguard over the city, and then a two-pronged offense that came at the enemy ships from either side. The tactic was designed to break up a formation—and since a formation was already lacking, it sent the enemy ships into chaos. Goro and Kauri split up, one at the center of each prong, and Kauri especially seemed to understand our maneuvers and complement them.

Kimmalyyn was ordinarily my wingmate, but I'd assigned her and Nedd to support each other. Nedd was usually Arturo's wingmate, but Arturo had taken it upon himself to get Alanik up to speed to fly with us. I wasn't sure how necessary that had been—she'd taught us as much as we'd taught her in terms of maneuvers—but I also hadn't seen a reason yet to break it up.

A group of nearly a dozen ships slipped away from the rest of our flight and headed for the city.

"FM, Sentry," I said. "We have incoming."

"We see them," FM said.

"Protect the city," I said. "We don't know their exact target, but—"

*Scud.* All of those ships seemed to be headed directly for *me*.

"I think we know what their target is," FM said. "They saw what you did earlier."

"Would you like me to read the meditation again?" Juno asked.

"No," I said. "I think I've got it. Unless you have one in there about getting your birds to fly better."

"Fly better!" Snuggles said.

"Let me see," Juno said, flipping through his book.

The ships were rapidly incoming. I didn't have time to wait for Juno.

"Cover me," I said to FM and Sentry. "But keep your distance."

“Done,” FM said.

Instead of turning and making the ships tail me, I flew directly at them. I pictured those birds over the ocean again, finding the rhythm of the waves, the way the nowhere pushed against my mind and my mind against it.

The ships scattered as I approached, all firing on me wildly. They didn’t want me to get too close.

I had an idea. “All ships, keep your distance.”

“Jerkface?” Arturo said. “What are you doing?”

“Something Spensa would try,” I said. If this worked, I would wish she were here to see it. If it didn’t, she was going to hear about it anyway. “Hold on, Juno,” I said. And I reached out in my mind for that flock of birds, raising them from the waves of the ocean so they skimmed along outside my ship, following me, flying with me.

I chased after the fleeing ships, dodging fire. I hit overburn on my boosters and cut a path up through the battle, ships scattering in front of me. I sent my mindblades out in clustered flocks, catching this ship and that one, cleaving off wings and tail fins and noses while my flight shot down the others as they ran. A few of the braver pilots tried to charge in after me, and pieces of their ships rained down over the ocean, torn to ribbons.

“*Damn*, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

“It seems you were correct,” Juno said. “You didn’t need a meditation.”

“Boom,” Boomslug said from his spot below my seat.

I gripped the edge of my panel to keep my hands from shaking. I *shouldn’t* be able to do this. It felt...unnatural.

“Supernatural” might be a better word. Why was it so much easier to watch Spensa do things like this than it was to do them myself?

“The enemy is headed toward the city,” FM said. “Sentry and I are on them.”

Sure enough, the enemy ships were fleeing in the direction of Dreamspring. I’d scared them, but instead of retreating to their carrier ship they were going to hit us where it hurt.

I didn’t think the kitsen’s dwellings were going to stand up well to destructor fire, and Cobb and Gran-Gran had no more cover than a scudding

*tent.*

“Skyward Flight, shoot down those fighters,” I said. “Don’t let them fire on the city.”

Gunning them down over Dreamspring would cause damage, but not as much as if we let the ships attack. I hadn’t seen any carrying lifebusters—they had come looking for us, not to destroy the kitsen city.

But that didn’t mean they couldn’t do a hell of a lot of damage if we let them run wild.

“Amphi,” I said, “where is Cuna?”

“They ran for the city to find shelter,” Nedd said. “I gave them a radio to stay in touch.”

“I am here,” Cuna said over the radio. “I took shelter in the senate building.”

The medtechs should be with Cobb and Gran-Gran, but they were all exposed. “I need you to go to the medical tent and help the medtechs move Cobb and Gran-Gran.”

“We can’t move them,” Alanik said. “Remember?”

We couldn’t leave them in a tent during an aerial raid. “They appeared in the library,” I said. “And our medical transport was in the other direction. Maybe moving them in the toward the library will be okay.”

“I’ll give the medical personnel your instructions,” Cuna said.

“Let me know how it goes,” I told them.

The flight chased after the ships as they cruised toward the city, while I watched our six, making sure it wasn’t a ploy to let another group of fighters from the carrier fall into flanking position. No more ships came from that direction. Yet.

“We’ve got incoming,” Arturo said, and sure enough from the other direction, over the cliff above Dreamspring, more ships were joining the fight. Kitsen fighters, two dozen of them, all engaging the remaining ships as they reached the city.

“Welcome, kinsmen!” Goro shouted over the radio. “Now we’ll show these humans how it’s done!”

The enemy ships turned their destructors on the new arrivals, sparing the city a bit, and my flight flanked the enemy, shattering shields and bringing down ships. One of the ships careened toward the city, and Alanik caught it with her light hook, dragging it toward the beach and dropping it on the sand where it wouldn't destroy the buildings. Nedd did the same with a ship Kimmalyyn shot down right over the middle of the city, dragging the fuselage up and dropping it on the cliffs. Some debris was pelting the city, but hopefully damage would be minimal.

"Jerkface," Alanik said. "The enemy is going to fall back."

She'd barely finished saying it when the enemy ships turned almost as one and accelerated out over the ocean again, angling up to the carrier ship waiting in the clouds.

"Do we follow them?" Nedd asked.

"Wait," I said. I didn't know what their game was, and I didn't want to leave the city vulnerable to another attack.

The fighters slid into the clouds near the carrier ship, which was half hidden now as the cloud cover moved overhead. They were still up there, beyond the clouds—I could see them on my proximity monitor. The only reason for them to pull back like that was if they thought they had more of an advantage at that fallback position, or—

"Angel," I said. "You heard a transmission?"

"Yes," she said. "They were given orders over the hypercomm to retreat and wait. They've reported that the kitsen are fighting alongside us, so they want a larger force to beat down the resistance."

Saints, that was not a good sign. "Amphi," I said, "I'm giving you temporary command of the flight."

"Jerkface?" Arturo said. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm going to go for help," I said. We had a few moments here, so this was the best chance I was going to get. I couldn't rely on the mindblades for everything. They were an effective tool, but I'd seen some of the monstrous weapons the Superiority had on their side and I wouldn't be able to stop them all—not even with the rest of the flight watching my back. "They're waiting for backup, so we need it too. I'll try to get Stoff to let me take the

platform.” I was tempted to tell him, rather than ask him, but I wasn’t sure how much longer that would work. It had only worked the first time because the command staff was reeling from the loss of Cobb and half the assembly, and because no one wanted to argue with me after what had happened to my parents.

I needed to feel out the situation, and I needed to do it quickly. “FM, I want you to come with me. Sentry can team up with Quirk and Nedder for the moment. We’ll land our ships and leave Snuggles in mine so we can return quickly and get back in the air.”

I hoped it would be quick, anyway. I didn’t know how long we’d have before the Superiority forces would arrive. “Alanik can keep me posted. Contact me immediately if you need us. Everyone clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Arturo said.

“Say hi to Stoff for us,” Nedd added.

I landed my ship against the cliff where it would be partially sheltered from view. FM’s came down beside me.

I looked over my shoulder at Juno. “Do you want to stay here?” I asked. “I can’t guarantee you’ll be safe in the ship.”

“I’d like to come with you,” Juno said. “Clearly my presence has been helpful.”

“It has,” I said. “I’m not going to use mindblades on Detritus though.”

“A shadow-walker travels the path at all times,” Juno said. “Not only when violence is required.”

I didn’t really know what that meant, but I also didn’t want to have to explain Juno’s presence to Stoff. “Actually,” I said, “the most helpful thing you could do is stay here and teach that meditation to Alanik.” She might not have a lot of time to learn, but she didn’t know how to use mindblades, and if she could pick up any skill at all...

“I can see the wisdom in that,” Juno said. “I never dreamed I’d work with a single cytonic, let alone have the privilege of directing *two*.”

“It’s your lucky day then.” I flipped on my radio. “Angel, if you want to come pick up Juno, he can run you through some exercises while I’m gone.”

“If his exercises taught you to do *that*,” Alanik said, “then I’ll be right there.”

“She’ll probably complain less than I did,” I said to Juno. I showed him how to work the radio in case he ran into trouble before Alanik arrived, and then I lifted the canopy of my ship.

My taynix needed to remain on Evershore so Gill would have a target he recognized to bring us right to our ship. “Stay here,” I said to Snuggles and Boomslug. Not that Boomslug could go far, but he tended to go wherever Snuggles went.

“Here!” Snuggles said.

I didn’t know if she understood, but it had to be good enough. I climbed out of my ship and met FM and Gill out on the sand.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s make it fast.”

“All right,” she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Gill, take us home.”

# Thirteen

It was even later on Detritus than it was on Evershore, but when we emerged in the taynix room on Platform Prime, we found Rig still at his desk in Engineering. Rig smiled when he saw FM, but then his smile immediately dropped.

“If you came without the rest of the flight, I’m guessing this isn’t good,” he said.

“It’s not,” I said. “We need to talk to Stoff.”

“I’m sure he’s gone to bed,” Rig said. “Almost everyone has.”

“Except for you,” FM said.

“Yeah,” Rig said. “I’ve been looking at some of the reports on the other platforms from the exploration crews. They found one a few hundred clicks from here with some similarities to Wandering Leaf. We think it might have a control room, and I’m charting us a good way to get in and take a look without getting hit by the autofire.”

That could be useful. I wondered if Stoff would let me take a few of the platforms to defend Evershore. Our planetary shield filled in the gaps between the platforms that had been wrecked, so I was pretty sure we could take a few without leaving ourselves entirely open, but Stoff wasn’t much of a risk-taker.

I could probably bring Wandering Leaf, because it technically belonged to the UrDail and not to the DDF, and I hoped he’d send a few extra flights. It might help if I reminded him that the Superiority hadn’t attacked our planet since we’d put up the shield, and that we could hyperjump back in a hurry the moment anything changed. Though I’d have to spin it in a way that allowed him to cover his ass later if I had any hope of convincing him extra firepower was necessary.

“How are things with the kitsen?” Rig said.

“Precarious,” FM said. “Come on. I’ll explain on the way to wake Stoff.”

Dragging the man out of bed probably wasn't going to endear us to him, but we didn't have a choice. I doubted those Superiority ships were going to wait until morning, and even if they did we'd better have reinforcements in place long before that.

While FM filled Rig in, I reached out to Alanik. *Status?*

*Still waiting*, she replied. *I don't like it.*

Neither did I. The Superiority had both cytonics and hyperdrives—they could bring vast resources to bear in an instant. If they were hesitating, it was because they were calling up their people wherever they were stationed—and it could be nearly anywhere in the galaxy. We'd taken out their planetary cannon on ReDawn, but I doubted it was their only one.

*And Juno?* I asked.

*He keeps telling me I am relaxed. I am not.*

*Yeah*, I said. *I wasn't either. It worked anyway though.*

*That is encouraging*, Alanik said. *Thank you.*

*Keep me informed*, I said, and I felt her agreement although she didn't respond in words.

When I tuned back in, FM was in the middle of telling Rig about me taking out the Superiority ships with the mindblades.

"That sounds dangerous," Rig said.

"It was amazing," FM said, and she sounded like she meant it.

"Sure. Amazing, but dangerous."

"It was kind of surreal," I said. "But it worked well in that fight. It won't be enough in the long term though. Now that the Superiority knows we're working with the kitsen, they'll gather more ships to bring against us. We need help."

We reached the corridor with Stoff's quarters. At the end of the hall a guard stood watch by his door—Kelin, who'd been assigned to watch Cobb since he became admiral.

That seemed like a bad sign.

She saluted as we approached. "I need you to wake Vice Admiral Stoff," I said. "We have urgent information."



Kelin nodded—I had higher clearance than she did, so she didn’t ask me for the information. She stepped inside, and then came out a few minutes later with Stoff, who wore a dressing gown.

“Oh good,” Stoff said. “You’re back. How are Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade? Are they in the infirmary? What is their condition?”

Oh, scud. Of course we had to start there. “The medical team was unable to move them without destabilizing them,” I said. Hopefully Cuna was able to move them into the library—I’d left before I’d found out the outcome. No need to get into the strange details of that. Stoff would only want answers I didn’t have. “The team wants to keep them there until we understand more about their condition.”

“Okay,” Stoff said. “I hardly think I needed that report in the middle of the night.”

“We have a bigger problem,” I said. “The Superiority found us on Evershore. They must have heard Kauri’s transmission and came looking for us. They attacked, and we defended ourselves and the nearby city, but then the Superiority withdrew. We heard over the hypercomm that they’re waiting for reinforcements.”

“Well,” Stoff said. “That does sound like a problem.”

At least we agreed on that. If he’d tried to convince me this wasn’t *our* problem, I would have worried about exploding in mindblades again.

“Sir,” I said. “We need to take Wandering Leaf to defend against whatever the Superiority is planning.”

“Fine,” Stoff said. “You didn’t need to wake me for that either.”

Didn’t I? It surprised me that Stoff wasn’t trying to claim DDF ownership over the thing since we were the ones who had retrieved it from ReDawn and figured out how it worked. It was a good thing—both for our current situation and our relationship with the UrDail—if he didn’t. But...

“We also need DDF support,” I told Stoff. “A few more flights at least. The more you can spare, the better.”

Now Stoff looked skeptical. “Detritus isn’t under attack,” I said. “We have the shield to protect us even if the Superiority were to return, and with the hyperdrives we could be here at a moment’s notice. We can spare the

ships, not only to protect Cobb and Mrs. Nightshade, but to show solidarity with the kitsen.”

Stoff watched me carefully, and then looked over at Kelin. “Excuse us,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Kelin said, and she paced off down the hall.

Stoff glanced at Rig, as if considering whether to send him away as well, but seemed to decide it wasn’t necessary. “Okay,” he said.

Um. “Okay, sir?”

“Okay, take the flights. How many do you need?”

“How many will you—”

“Never mind,” Stoff said. “Don’t tell me. I’ll radio over to Command that I’ve authorized you to call up flights to support you on Evershore. You can call them up yourself.”

*I could?* “Sir?” I said.

Stoff sighed, and I felt like I was missing something. I looked sideways at FM, but she didn’t seem to be any clearer on what was happening than I was.

“Your orders came directly from the admiral, didn’t they?” Stoff said. “I wouldn’t dream of overruling him.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw FM and Rig exchange a look.

I didn’t really know what to say to that. I didn’t want to argue—I’d been worried that Stoff was going to take away what limited autonomy I had now that he knew Cobb was in fact incapacitated. DDF protocol was clear that he had the right—even the responsibility—to do just that.

“I can decide how many flights to call to Evershore,” I said. I didn’t want to belabor this too much—it was good news really, and Skyward Flight needed us to take care of this quickly and bring them help.

But this felt more like a trap.

“Yes,” Stoff said. “You’ve been very clear on what Cobb ordered you to do. If this is your mission, then you should have the autonomy to complete it, don’t you think?”

Ah. I saw what he was doing. On paper I was a renegade. I’d taken my flight and our starfighters to ReDawn, officially against orders. I’d then

returned and demanded that we cut the assembly out of the loop and that we work with the kitsen to retrieve Cobb. There were plenty of people who would testify to my insubordination—everyone but Cobb would consider that case open and shut.

Stoff hadn't arrested me when we returned, but he'd been watching me ever since. He'd been giving me a lot of leeway in case my actions might be in Detritus's best interest, but he'd never quite committed to attaching his name to anything I'd done in case it blew up like the scudding Superiority ship.

If Stoff kept this up, he could still take credit for anything Skyward Flight accomplished—if he *wanted* the credit. If we failed he'd be able to wash his hands of it. Say I acted on my own, say he didn't really understand what was happening while I was offworld.

Did Stoff really not care about anything but keeping his head down and avoiding responsibility for whatever came next?

"Sir," I said. "Forgive me for questioning, but that's a lot of autonomy."

"It's no more than the admiral saw fit to give you," Stoff said. "Isn't that right?"

Stars. Maybe that *was* all he cared about. This was in fact a *lot* more autonomy than the admiral had seen fit to give me. I didn't want to push Stoff too hard though. I only wanted to understand his motives, not change his mind.

"This is important," I said to him. "We're protected for now, but it isn't going to last. The Superiority's resources are as vast as the galaxy. They're trying to convince the *delvers* to be on their side. If we don't find a way to resist them..."

Stoff cringed, his shoulders hunching forward. "You don't have to tell me." I saw genuine fear in his eyes. He was *terrified*. "If you think you can do something to better our situation, then you scudding well had better do it."

He closed the door in my face.

"Did he seriously just do that?" FM asked.

“Dump responsibility for everything on us?” Rig asked. “Yeah, I think he did.”

Not on us. On *me*. I was an easy mark. My parents were gone, so I couldn’t depend on them to cover for me. I was isolated. Politically speaking, I was *expendable*.

Stoff seemed sincere about wanting us to succeed. He knew how desperate our situation was. But he wasn’t going to do anything about it. He was a vice admiral; with Cobb out of commission it was his job to step up and lead.

But he was hiding like a coward because he was too afraid to deal with it.

“Jorgen?” FM said.

“Hang on,” I said. “I need to check on the others.”

I leaned against the wall next to Stoff’s door, reaching into the nowhere. *Alanik?* I said.

*Still nothing*, she said. *This rodent keeps talking to me about birds. There are no birds living in my mind, Jorgen, and I don’t know what he means about the waves either.*

Huh. That had made sense to me, but... *That’s about how I feel when you talk about finding locations in the nowhere*, I said. *Maybe mindblades aren’t your thing?*

I felt annoyance from her. Alanik didn’t like to think herself incapable of things other people could do.

I understood. I didn’t like it either.

*I can keep trying*, she said, *but I worry about leaving those ships alone in the sky. We could go up there and try to take them out if you want. Fewer to fight later.*

If there was the option to wait or to act, Alanik was like Spensa—she always leaned toward acting. More than leaned; she ran toward it at full speed. This time she had a point, but I still didn’t think it was the right move. *No*, I told her. *Protect the city.*

*There are a lot of cities, Jorgen*, Alanik said. *A whole planet’s worth. How are we going to protect them all?*

She was right. Evershore didn't have a shield, or even the cover of platforms and debris. They were so *exposed*. At least we'd only had to protect Alta. The kitsen were spread out over the entire *planet*.

How did people survive this way? How were we going to protect them?

*Could* we?

*I'm working on it*, I said, as if I had a clue about what I was doing. *Focus on Dreamspring for now.*

"Jorgen?" FM said. "Should we head over to Command?"

The command center was staffed all night. The vice admiral had probably already put in the call and gone back to sleep, leaving the rest of it to us.

We did need to head over to Command, but if Stoff was really going to let me have whatever I wanted...

"Rig," I said. "How long would it take you to get people over to the control room the exploration team found on that platform?"

"We can get there quickly," Rig said. "Whether or not we can get it to work—"

"It's worth a try," I said. If Stoff was giving me free rein...scud, he expected this to blow up in my face, and he might be right. "At least get a team over there to look at it."

"I'll start knocking on doors," Rig said.

I closed my eyes. I was pulling Rig into this. Again. He'd take the fall with me if we failed at this. "I can't order you to do that," I said. I didn't have the authority for that.

"Jorgen," Rig said, "I jumped on the going-rogue train with you all when I left with you for ReDawn. It's a little late to reconsider now." He squeezed FM's hand, and then he took off down the corridor toward the dormitories.

We were all on that train, and it was my scudding fault. The corridor walls seemed to squeeze in on me, and I closed my eyes.

"Jorgen," FM said.

I didn't respond.

"Say something so I know you're not about to cut the platform apart from the inside."

“I’m not,” I said. I could control it. I *would* control it.

“He’s setting us up,” she said.

“Yes.”

“He’s going to try to make *you* look like this rogue who doesn’t care about orders. *There’s* a piece of irony.”

I wasn’t the only person who saw it. That was comforting. “Only if it goes wrong.”

“Of course,” FM says. “If we succeed, he’ll probably try to take credit.”

That was exactly what he would do.

“So,” FM said, “are we going to call up the flights?”

That was what I should be doing. The others needed us.

But I couldn’t move. I knew I should be acting, but was this really what I was doing now? Running off on another set of not-orders toward—what? Did I really think we could take down the entire Superiority air force with a couple of flights and one platform? Even if Rig got a few other platforms to move, did we stand a chance? We’d won on ReDawn, but that could have been a fluke. A bit of false hope that preceded total destruction. I could be leading everyone I cared about to their deaths, and it was *my* call, *my* idea, *my* decision—

I couldn’t watch anyone else I loved die like that.

In my mind, I watched the Superiority ship explode again.

*Boom.*

FM grabbed me by the arm, and I startled.

“*Jorgen*,” she said. “Talk to me. You’re starting to freak out again, and I *really* do not want to be diced up by your mindblades.”

Stars, was she afraid of me? “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry. You aren’t alone in this. I know you think you are, but you’re not.”

“He’s making me make the call,” I said. “But is this the right one? I *think* it’s what Cobb would do. But I don’t really know, do I? And if I’m wrong...”

“This isn’t all on you,” FM insisted.

“It is.”

“You still believe in the chain of command, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “And we’re operating way outside of it.” By orders. Sort of. Two separate commanders had *sort of* ordered me to do this, and the “sort of” part felt like it was going to break my brain.

“It’s a chain for a reason,” she said. “It’s not one person at the top all alone doing everything. Yeah, ultimately you make the decisions. And you are doing a scudding good job of that, okay? But we’re all here to support you. The only piece you have to do on your own is the final word.”

“I know,” I said. “But at the end of the day, it’s my call that saves people or gets people killed.” Maybe both. Stars, why was it always both?

“That’s true,” FM said. “But we’re all here supporting you because we trust your judgment.”

“You question my judgment all the time!” I said. “On Sunreach, I was going to make the call to leave the flight behind. And maybe we could have gone back for them, but maybe we couldn’t have, and who knows how many of them would have died in the meantime. *You* figured out how to save their lives. Not me.”

“Okay,” FM said. “But what about ReDawn? You made the call to stay and take out that Superiority ship. We could have cut and run after the cytonic inhibitors were taken out, but *you* risked all of our lives to destroy that battleship and protect the people of ReDawn, and that was clearly the right thing to do.”

“What about when I chewed you out for stealing the taynix and bringing them to Wandering Leaf?” I asked. “You didn’t think I was doing the right thing then.”

FM closed her eyes. We’d been avoiding this conversation ever since that happened. I didn’t want to have it now—or ever—but I also wasn’t going to let her pretend that she always agreed with me.

“I was angry with you,” she said quietly. “And I was scudding *scared*. I said things I didn’t mean. And I’m sorry I said those things, I really am, because they aren’t true. You are my flightleader, and you’re scudding *good* at it, Jorgen.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.” It felt like I was failing them all.

FM shook her head. “Do you think we all follow you because of the chain of command? The things we have done lately are scudding *insane*. There is not an officer in all of the DDF who would condemn us for refusing to go along with it.”

That was probably true. Stars, I’d justified a lot of things I shouldn’t have, by the book at least.

“We’re all here,” FM continued, “because we believe in what we’re doing. And we all trust you with our lives because we know that at the end of the day, Jorgen Weight is going to do the right thing. Sometimes you lose sight of that. Sometimes you get so bogged down in the *rules* that you lose track of what’s right for a minute. But when it comes down to the decisions you make with our lives, you do the right thing every time.”

I wasn’t so sure. That was why I tried to follow the rules, because if I was going to make a mistake, I wanted it to be one that couldn’t have been avoided. If I erred in following protocol, at least I always had the protocol to blame.

“You think I should call up the flights,” I said.

“Honestly?” FM said. “I don’t know. Maybe we should pull back; maybe the Superiority would leave the kitsen alone. Or more likely they’d do some damage and there would be lives lost, but maybe it would be fewer lives than if we goad them into a full-scale attack that we’re not sure we can defend against. It’s a risky move, Jorgen, and I don’t know what the right answer is.”

I gritted my teeth, dragging my hands over my hair. If I could see the future, know which would be the right choice for the most people—for *our* people—I’d do it.

Why was it so scudding hard to know what that was?

“But,” FM said, “one of our goals on Evershore is to make an alliance. And the calls you made on ReDawn are the reason we have an alliance with the UrDail. Because of *you*.”

I shrugged. “I was ordered to make that alliance.”

“Right. And everyone always succeeds at everything they’re ordered to do, right? Having an order makes it easy! Basically done for you. So you



barely get credit for it, because you were simply following orders. Is that it?"

"Um," I said. That sounded about right, but from her tone I could tell that it shouldn't.

"Meanwhile, if you don't succeed, *that* is entirely your fault. No one else could possibly be to blame, because Jorgen Weight is all powerful and if anything goes wrong it's always on him."

"I think that's a little hyperbolic."

"You think?" FM said. "Tell me that's not how you feel. Go ahead."

"Um," I said again.

"You can't have it both ways. You can't be powerless and totally at fault. Which is it?"

I thought about that. "It's neither."

"Right," FM said. "Some things are under your control, and others aren't. You do the best you can with what you have to work with. And *that* is what sets you apart—what you do with it."

I sighed. "Fine. You've made your point."

"So, what are we doing? What are your priorities here?"

"Cobb's life." That was a clear priority, clean and by the book. "And we can't pull him out." But stars, even if it would save kitsen lives, we couldn't *leave* him there.

"Okay," FM said.

"Also the lives of our flightmates," I added.

"And all the kitsen lives in danger right now? What about them?"

"They aren't our people. But Cobb ordered us to—"

"Forget for a minute about what Cobb ordered you to do," FM said. "What do you think is the *right* thing to do?"

I didn't know which call would turn out to be the best one, but for the moment I tried to set that aside. Maybe the right call was the one that hoped for the most good for the most people, even if the outcome wasn't totally assured.

Things seemed clearer when I looked at them that way. "Save lives," I said. "Defend the kitsen, defend Cobb, secure the alliance. Work together

against the people who are trying to kill us all.” It sounded so simple when I said it like that. It had a ring of truth to it.

“That sounds right to me too,” FM said.

I nodded. “What Stoff is doing is a trap, but it’s a political one. We can save lives first and politic later.” I would have preferred to politic *never*, but if there was an order to this, that was it.

FM watched me, waiting. She was doing what she’d said—talking me through it, but then waiting for me to make the decision.

I could recall my flight and leave the kitsen to deal with the Superiority. If Stoff could hide behind the chain of command so could I, and no one in the DDF could blame me for it. I could pin the whole thing right back on Stoff, and he wouldn’t have a renegade on whom to shuffle off the responsibility.

But I already knew I could never live with myself if I did that.

“Enough standing around,” I said. “Let’s call up the flights and get that platform.”

FM grinned at me. “Yes, sir,” she said.

And together we took off running down the corridor.

## Fourteen

No one questioned me when I said I wanted three flights readied for hyperjump as soon as possible, and all pilots on standby in case we needed more. If we were committing to protecting Cobb, Gran-Gran, and the kitsen, then we had to be all in.

We'd left a taynix on Wandering Leaf—Bob the commslug, named by Nedd—so the other slugs could take us back and forth. Gill transported us to the taynix control room on the platform, a room with a wide control panel and rows of boxes to hold taynix in the various defense and weapons systems.

Everyone on the platform was asleep—some of the UrDail Independence pilots had chosen to stay here, probably to ensure that our military didn't adopt Wandering Leaf as their own asset.

FM tucked Gill into the hyperdrive box. I intended to direct the hyperjump to Evershore from this control room. I could send the instructions to the pilots' slugs from here, so long as each flight had at least one hyperdrive on board. Then I could hyperjump Wandering Leaf into the airspace over Dreamspring, coordinating with Alanik to ensure none of our people ended up close enough to get shot by Wandering Leaf's defenses.

Rig appeared in front of the control panel beside FM, and she jumped. No matter how many times we hyperjumped, it was still hard to get used to people appearing out of nowhere. It reminded me of the times as a child when I used to jump out from behind furniture and startle my mother. It always worked no matter how many times I did it, much to my mother's chagrin.

Sometimes it wasn't what happened that surprised you. It was when.

"I'm about to fly out to that platform that resembles Wandering Leaf," Rig said. "But I'm worried we won't be able to figure out how to move any

platforms quickly enough. I'm equally worried that we will and we'll leave Detritus open to attack."

"There are already holes in the platforms around the planet," I said. "The shield stretches between them. It would continue to fill in the gaps if we only took a few platforms, wouldn't it?"

"I hope so," Rig said.

"If it doesn't, we'll return them," I said. "Maybe we won't even be able to figure out how to move them, but I think we need to explore all of our options."

"Of course," Rig said. "I'll have Drape with me, so if you need to communicate you can hyperjump in and back out again. I'll also see if there's a hypercomm there that we can get working." He looked nervously from me to FM, and FM threw her arms around him.

"Be safe," he said.

I hoped we would be, but stars, none of us could promise that.

Rig gave Drape the command to take him home, and he blinked out to meet with the engineers. FM looked shaken.

"You okay?" I asked.

"No," FM said. "But this isn't the time to talk about it."

"We have to wait for the signal from the other flights that they're ready to hyperjump," I said. "They've just been roused from their beds, so we have a few minutes."

FM squeezed her eyes shut. "Saints and stars, Jorgen. It's a lot easier to make you talk than to do it myself."

"I could call Rig back," I said. "But I think he needs to get moving with the other engineers."

"I don't want to talk to Rig about it anyway," she mumbled.

That surprised me. "I thought you said you liked that he made you talk."

"I said it was good for me. But I hate it. And I realize that if I don't talk to you right now, you're going to use that as an excuse to shut down and probably explode again."

I hoped that wasn't true. But I didn't deny it.

FM sighed. “So yes, it sucks, okay? I hate leaving Rig, knowing I may not be coming back. I know what it does to him and how much worse it’ll be if something happens to me, and I feel terrible about it. I wonder if I ever should have started things between us, if that was really fair to him. *And* I wonder how much longer he’s going to want to put up with this before he decides that I’m not worth the stress. Okay? Are you happy now?”

“No,” I said. “But I’m glad you told me.”

FM fiddled with one of the console buttons, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. “Do you ever feel like maybe you shouldn’t have started things with Spensa?”

“I didn’t start it,” I said. “She did. But...” It surprised me how easily the answer came. “No. I’ve never regretted it. I could never regret one minute with her, no matter how it all turns out.” The strength of my conviction startled me. I meant every word.

FM’s shoulders relaxed.

“You don’t regret it either,” I said. “You’re just scared.”

FM pressed her lips together, and she nodded. “I don’t think it’s fair to him. But if you can handle Spensa running off into literally nowhere...”

Rig dropped out of flight school after his first time in the air, but he’d come with us into battle on ReDawn anyway, and he hadn’t flinched. “He knows why you’re doing this. He’s making the same call.”

“Yeah,” FM said. “And I hate him being in danger too. I almost hope he can’t get the platforms to move, because then he’ll be here and he’ll be safer.”

If the platforms didn’t move, we’d all have far fewer resources to deal with whatever the Superiority brought against us. But I didn’t point out her bad logic. I understood.

“I’m going to go wake the UrDail pilots,” FM said. “So they aren’t frightened when the platform moves, and so they can decide to stay here if that’s what they want.”

“Good idea,” I said. Alanik’s brother and the others had fought beside us on ReDawn, but this wasn’t their fight. They deserved the opportunity to decide for themselves.

“Jerkface,” a voice said over my radio. “This is Robin from Stardragon Flight. We were told to contact you as soon as we were in the air.”

Last time I talked to Robin over the radio, her flight had been called up to keep Skyward Flight from escaping to ReDawn. “Copy, Robin,” I said. “Do you have a hyperdrive?”

“We’ve got one of them in our flight,” Robin said. “Ivy and Victory Flights have a couple more each.”

“Good,” I said. “Connect all your ships with light-lances. Don’t leave anyone behind. Signal me when you’re ready, and we’ll bring everyone with us to Evershore.”

“Jerkface?” Robin said. “What the scud are we doing?”

“Defending potential new allies,” I said. “They’re under attack because the Superiority got wind of our presence there. We’ll be joining their air force in defending their planet. I’ll give you specific formations when we arrive.”

“Yes, sir,” Robin said.

I blinked. I wasn’t technically Robin’s superior, and I was giving her orders anyway. Stoff had given me leave to do that, but...

I didn’t correct her. I was going to need them all to listen to me, so this was a *good* sign even if it wasn’t exactly right.

*Jorgen?* Alanik said in my mind. *Another carrier ship has arrived.*

*We’re on our way,* I told her.

I made sure Gill was ready while FM alerted the UrDail pilots.

“We’re ready to go,” Robin told me over the radio. “My flight wants to know where exactly we’re heading?”

Had I not told them? “Evershore,” I said. “It’s a planet inhabited by small fox aliens.”

There was a pause. “Okay,” Robin said. “Thanks for filling us in.”

I sighed. Answering all their questions would take time we didn’t have. “You’ll see soon enough. All flights, prepare for hyperjump.”

FM returned to the doorway of the control room. “Gilaf and the others are getting ready. They’re in.”

“Good,” I said. “We’re going to need them.”

*I'm ready to hyperjump, I said to Alanik. Get someone high enough in the air that the platform won't fire on the planet when we arrive.*

There was a long pause.

*Arturo's up high enough, Alanik said. The space around him is clear. Go.*

I reached out to the other flights, finding the minds of their taynix, and gave them instructions to go to Alanik's slug, Snide, down near Dreamspring. Then I reached for Gill in the box and instructed him to take the platform to Naga. I wanted us to emerge in the air, not drop the platform on top of the beach where the autoturrets would fire on the city.

We slipped beneath the unseeing eyes and appeared beneath the black sky, marred grey by periodic clouds. I could see the carrier ships Alanik was talking about up above the clouds, pieces of their large boxy shapes visible behind the fluffy obstructions. Arturo hovered right above the platform's surface, close enough that he wouldn't be hit by the autocannons.

"Scud, Jerkface," Arturo said. "That thing popping out of nowhere is terrifying."

The platforms shook as the guns fired at some enemy ships that had been waiting right inside the clouds. They scattered and retreated.

"Welcome back," Kimmalyon said over the radio.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm going to do something about those carrier ships. Everyone else steer clear of the platform and defend the city."

"We've got more kitsen ships on our side now," Arturo said. "They're gathering over Dreamspring."

"And we will feast on the souls of all who dare to harm our beloved city," Goro said.

"I sure hope that's metaphorical," FM muttered, then turned to me. "Gilaf will contact you over the radio when he and the other UrDail pilots are ready to jump out to help. I'm going to take Gill to my ship."

"Do it," I said. "Amphi, I want you to command the flight. It's too hard for me to keep track of you all while I'm working the platform." Last time I'd had Rig to handle this, and all I'd had to do was command Boomslug to shoot the hyperweapon. This was going to be more complicated.

"Copy, Jerkface. What is our strategy?"

Scud, we needed one of those. Not only for our flight, but for everyone. “Protect the city,” I said. “Victory Flight, make sure the city itself doesn’t take fire. Keep the enemy distracted.” I paused. “Amphi, have we heard from Cuna?”

“They’re working with the medical people to get Cobb and Gran-Gran moved to the library. Going toward the cliffs doesn’t seem to be causing their vitals to drop.”

It all had something to do with that portal, but I didn’t understand what. “Good,” I said. “They’ll have better cover there. But we still need to protect the city. Stardragon and Ivy Flights, intercept the enemy ships before they reach the city. Your goal is to make sure Victory sees no action.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Robin said.

“Skyward Flight will take point. All flights stay at least five clicks from the platform to avoid the autofire. Our objective is to convince them we aren’t worth it and pull their ships back. If you have a hyperdrive and need to be pulled out of the heat, let me know. Otherwise, Amphi will give you specific formation instructions.”

“Okay,” Arturo said. He probably wasn’t prepared to do that for multiple flights, but he started doing it anyway.

Which left me free to focus on the new carrier ships in the sky. I wasn’t going to sit here and wait for them to pour out their fighters to bombard the city.

I was going to take them out first.

“Jerkface,” Alanik said, “your sidekick wants to join you again. I think he’s given up on me.”

“Send him over with Snide,” I said.

Snide and Juno appeared a moment later, both riding on Juno’s platform. A moment later Alanik called Snide back, and the slug disappeared again.

“I did not give up on her,” Juno said. “I simply said she appeared to have less aptitude for mindblades than you do. It wasn’t a qualitative judgment.”

“To Alanik it probably felt like one,” I said.

“Is there some particular meditation you would like to try?” Juno asked. “I don’t have all my books, but I could—”



“Not right now,” I said. I called to Snuggles, who appeared in my arms with Boomslug. I tucked Snuggles into the taynix box where Gill had been. “Maybe later. Right now I need to concentrate.”

“The purpose of meditation is to help your concentration—”

I tuned him out, loading Boomslug into the platform’s hyperweapon. Then I focused on the airspace near the carrier ship and sent Snuggles the instruction to go.

We slid beneath the eyes and then Wandering Leaf reappeared beneath the carrier ship. Our inhibitor field encompassed the enemy ship, preventing it from hyperjumping while the autoturrets fired, weakening the shield, piercing through it in a few places to punch holes in the hull. The hangar doors opened and ships poured out, trying to escape. The big guns couldn’t possibly hit all those targets. The sensors showed that my people were still flying low—I didn’t need to worry about clipping them yet.

*Go*, I said to Boomslug, focusing on the area right outside the hangar.

I felt the edge of the nowhere ripping apart as the hyperweapon fired, mindblades flying out at the escaping ships, bypassing the shields, cleaving their hulls in two. Debris rained down out of the sky. The pilots didn’t even get a chance to eject.

I couldn’t afford to feel sorry for them. I leaned toward the window, spotting the next carrier ship halfway behind a nearby tower of clouds.

*Go*, I said to Snuggles, and suddenly we were in front of it, the platform shaking with autoturret fire.

“We’re ready,” Alanik’s brother, Gilaf, said over the radio. “But we’d rather not jump out right here, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Sorry for the short notice,” I said. “We didn’t get much more ourselves. I’ll jump you down closer to the planet.”

“Hell of a way to wake up,” Gilaf said.

I contacted the taynix in Gilaf’s ship and sent him and the other UrDail pilots down to the place where we’d first brought the platform in.

This carrier ship seemed mostly empty, but I still told Boomslug to fire, aiming the hyperweapon at the hull of the ship. It diced into chunks, bits of it blowing out into the sky and then falling.

“Did you do that?” Juno asked, watching through the window.

“I did,” I said. Stars, this thing was powerful. This tactic could be less effective against a battleship, which might be equipped with an inhibitor, but we were putting a serious amount of metal into the ocean from these carrier ships. Bits were going to wash up on the beach for years.

What could we do if we were able to move more of the other platforms from their orbit around Detritus?

The third carrier ship belched forth more fighters. I could feel the distinct vibration of a cytonic among them, and I reached out, listening for any cytonic communications, to see what we could learn about their plans.

Instead I felt something else. A thrumming against the nowhere, a rhythmic knocking like someone tapping their nails against the boundary between that world and ours.

The enemy cytonic sliced across the battlefield, headed directly for Alanik. The thrumming followed them, and as I focused I could feel small projectiles swarming around them, like pointed shards of glass made out of bits of the nowhere.

Oh, *scud*.

“Angel, get out of there,” I said. “That incoming ship has—”

The shards of nowhere flew out around the enemy pilot’s ship in a swirling melee, clipping wings and piercing hulls. Two ships went down—one from Ivy Flight and one from Stardragon—as the ship neared Alanik.

Alanik’s ship blinked out of existence and reappeared farther down toward the city, where Victory Flight was chasing off the fighters that had pierced through our other forces. The enemy ship sailed right past the place where she’d been, toward Kimmalyn and Nedd, who darted away. The ship pursued Kimmalyn. Before I could say anything, Arturo was yelling at her over the radio to go into a dive, get out of there.

She dove, but the enemy ship followed her, slicing her ship into three even pieces. The wreckage fell to the ground. She didn’t eject, but she wouldn’t have needed to. I searched for her taynix in the falling wreckage, but I couldn’t find him. I hoped he’d hyperjumped her out.

“All flights,” I said, “that pilot has mindblades. Take them down.”

“We can’t get close enough to use the IMP,” Amphi said. “Quirk’s our best shot and she’s down.”

“Nedder,” FM said. “Did Quirk make it out?”

“I don’t know,” Nedd said. He sounded shaken. The cytonic with the mindblades dove again, this time taking off after Catnip.

I found Catnip’s slug, Whiskers, and instructed it to jump down closer to the city, below Victory Flight. Catnip disappeared. Our ships flew loosely around the enemy cytonic, all trying to peg the ship with destructor fire without getting close enough to be torn apart by the mindblades, but the enemy ship rolled and dodged, evading their fire.

I couldn’t let this continue. I could get in my own ship and try to go after the cytonic, but I imagined they had a lot more practice with those mindblades than I had, and possibly a lot more reach.

“All flights,” I said, “pull up.”

All across the battlefield, ships shot up into the clouds, clashing with the Superiority ships that had made it out of their carriers. Not all the kitsen flights obeyed, but those that didn’t were far enough away from the cytonic that they should be safe from the autofire above and below.

*Go*, I told Snuggles.

And I hyperjumped the platform directly below the cytonic pilot.

The cytonic pilot immediately pulled up, accelerating to get out of the inhibitor field.

*Go*, I said to Boomslug.

Boomslug fired the hyperweapon in the direction of the pilot, but they reached the edge of the inhibitor field and hyperjumped away. I searched for them across the sky—

And found them high above the planet, farther even than the carrier ships. Most of our forces were between me and them, but I could follow in an instant, if I could only see where they’d gone. I looked up through the window at the clouds—

And was blinded by a blast of blue energy that poured down from the sky, striking the shield around Wandering Leaf, which sputtered and crackled.

I squinted against the light. When it faded, I stared up at a large, newly arrived ship with an enormous cannon on the front of it.

Scud.

*Scud.*

“What is that?” Juno asked.

“It’s a planetary weapon,” I said.

“A weapon for planets,” Juno said. “It seems wrong to invent such a thing.”

“No argument here,” I said. It looked just like the one we’d destroyed on ReDawn. It made sense that it hadn’t been unique. They must have had the thing charged before they hyperjumped it in, which made a sick, reckless kind of sense.

We could *not* let that thing fire on the planet. I didn’t know how many kitsen that ship could destroy in one blast, and I didn’t want to find out.

“Jerkface—” Arturo said over the radio.

“I see it,” I said. “All flights, clear the space around the cannon.” The flights split, going into evasive maneuvers and leading the enemy ships away from the cannon, which was fixed squarely on Wandering Leaf.

They’d take out the platform and then Dreamspring. I had to destroy the cannon before that happened.

The airspace between me and the cannon was clear. I still didn’t know for certain if Kimmalyn was okay, or if any of my friends had been caught in that energy beam, but there were going to be a lot of other casualties if I didn’t act quickly. I focused on the space just below the cannon and hyperjumped the platform up.

The autoturrets fired immediately, pummeling the cannon and the ship around it. *Scud*, this thing was terrifying from this close. Last time it was Rig who’d had to stare one of these down. I hadn’t given him enough credit for it. The blue light was building again. I focused on the cannon, ready to tell Boomslug to fire—

And suddenly the vibration of the universe went dead. I could no longer feel the cytonic inside the enemy ship, or the minds of Boomslug and Snuggles so nearby in the boxes. Scud, the enemy cytonics had put up an

inhibitor, and I'd brought the platform right into range. It was the same thing I'd done to the mindblade cytonic, but they had a ship with an engine, and Wandering Leaf moved only by hyperjump.

I was stuck here.

"This seems bad!" Juno said, his voice almost a squeak.

The blue light glowed brighter and brighter, and then the beam pummeled my shields again. The shield crackled and then blinked out, leaving the platform vulnerable to the next attack. I couldn't hyperjump out. I couldn't use the hyperweapon. I didn't have a starfighter on board, and Alanik couldn't come in to get me.

I stared up into the mouth of the cannon as it once again began to glow with an eerie blue light.

# Fifteen

The autoturret continued to pound at the cannon. It was doing damage, but it wasn't going to disable the thing fast enough. I was going to get blown to pieces on this platform the moment it finished charging.

"Amphi," I said over the radio. "I have to get out of here. The autoturrets are distracted. Can any of you dodge the fire and fly in to pick me up?"

"Nedder's closest," Arturo said.

"On it," Nedd said.

"Follow me," I said to Juno. I scooped Snuggles, Boomslug, Bob the commslug, and the inhibitor taynix out of their boxes and took off at a full run toward the hangar.

When I arrived, I watched through the windows as Nedd pulled a barrel roll past the autofire. The turrets were focused on the ship with the cannons and were doing some impressive damage to the ship *around* it. Maybe they *would* be able to disable the thing before—

The blue light grew even more blinding. Nedd used his light-lance to flip around one of the turrets and landed on the platform right outside the hangar.

Juno's floating platform zipped along behind me as we ran up to Nedd's cockpit just as he lifted the canopy. The noise of the autofire was deafening, and I dove into the cockpit behind Nedd, straddling the back of his seat and holding on with both hands. Juno hovered beside Nedd's seat, and the four slugs flattened their bodies against me.

Nedd pulled down the canopy and didn't even have time for a wisecrack before he took off again. The turrets were so focused on the planetary weapon that they didn't fire on us, but when we got far enough away that the vibrations returned, I had Snuggles hyperjump us several kilometers farther just to be certain.

The world flared blue as the cannon fired, the blast rocketing through Wandering Leaf, tearing it apart. The autocannons had taken out a good half of the Superiority ship, and the cannon's light faded, no longer powering. We'd gotten rid of the weapon.

But we'd lost the platform in the process.

"Jerkface," FM said, "did the UrDail pilots all make it out?"

"They did," I said. "No casualties. Just catastrophic damage."

"Dude, I saved your life," Nedd said. "The least you could do is stop squeezing my pecs."

I dropped my arms from around Nedd's chair. I hadn't realized I was holding on so tight or so...awkwardly. "Sorry," I said. "Hang on, I'm going to transport us to my ship." My whole body was squeezed into a space so tight I wasn't sure how I was managing to fit. I'd only gotten in here on pure adrenaline.

I directed Snuggles to jump Nedd's ship to the beach next to mine, still sheltered under the cliff, then I held on to her and had her hyperjump me, Juno, and Boomslug out of the cockpit. We landed in the sand outside my ship.

There standing in front of it was Kimmalyn, with Happy tucked into a sling across her chest. "Thank the stars you're okay," I said.

"Happy teleported me to the other side of the beach," Kimmalyn said. "I was thinking about stealing your ship, but I guess you need it."

"I do," I said. I didn't think for a minute that the cytonic with the mindblades had been killed in that blast. They would still be out there, and I wasn't going to let them wreak havoc on our forces. "If you take Happy home, you can get another ship and then hyperjump to Naga," I said. "That'll get you back in the fight."

"On it," Kimmalyn said. "Just...be careful."

Scud, she'd been shot out of the sky. It was only Happy that had saved her. "If you're too shaken up—"

"I'm fine," Kimmalyn said. Her hands were shaking, but she gave me a very forced smile. "I would feel much worse knowing you all were still up there without me. Happy, let's go home."

Kimmalyyn disappeared, and I climbed into my cockpit, Juno floating in behind me before I closed the canopy.

My radio was going nuts.

“Jerkface!” FM said over the radio. “Are you okay?”

“He got out,” Alanik said. “He’s down on the beach.”

“I’m here,” I said. I lifted my ship a couple of meters, using my sensors to take stock of the battle. The planetary weapon was high enough in the atmosphere that it wasn’t falling immediately to the ground, though the cannon was obviously destroyed.

*Jorgen*, Alanik said in my head. *Watch out—*

With a great crunching of metal and shattering of glass, my ship ripped apart around me. A pair of mindblades sliced down into the dash, obliterating the canopy. I slammed down the altitude control and jumped out through the torn metal, pulling my slugs with me out onto the sand.

I could feel the enemy cytonic over on the beach. They’d hyperjumped after me. Juno slid out through the broken glass and hid beside me, the ship between us and the enemy cytonic.

It wasn’t going to last for long. I felt more mindblades forming around the enemy cytonic, another volley about to rip through the ship to get at me.

“Now would be a good time for that meditation,” I said to Juno.

“You are completely relaxed!” Juno said.

I reached for the nowhere, skimming my mind over the surface. My birds formed again, little shards of death and nothingness, and I flew them with all my might over the ship toward the enemy cytonic. More blades flew at us, and I pulled Juno’s platform down as I flattened myself against the ground. The enemy’s mindblades dug into the ship, and I twisted mine around, jabbing at the enemy cytonic where I could see them in my mind.

The enemy’s mindblades vanished. We’d had cover but they hadn’t, and when I peered over the ship I found the body of a dione with bright red skin lying bleeding on the ground.

Scud. I’d never killed someone at such close range before. I’d never had to stare at their bleeding body, knowing I caused that. The sand beneath the dione turned a strange dark blue color. The body didn’t so much as twitch.



My ship was thrashed, but the radio still worked. “Jerkface, you okay?” Arturo asked.

“Fine,” I said. “But I lost my ship.”

“We’ve got more company.” I looked up and found another carrier ship arriving. The Superiority had to be mustering their ships as they went, or else they’d underestimated what size force it would take to defeat us.

But they were going to keep coming until they’d accomplished it. We were going to need to bring a lot more fire to this fight.

“Amphi,” I said, “you’re in command. Protect the city. I’m going to go check on Rig, see if we can bring more platforms.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

I picked up my slugs again, letting Boomslug ride on my shoulder, and placed a hand on Juno’s platform.

“You want to come with me?” I asked Juno.

“Where you will go, I will go,” Juno replied.

I would give the kitsen this—they were some of the bravest beings I’d ever met. “Take me to Drape,” I said to Snuggles.

“Drape,” Snuggles said.

Evershore and all of the ships above it disappeared. We passed beneath the eyes, and then suddenly I stood in a small room much like the one on Wandering Leaf. The window looked out at the stars, over half a broken platform drifting next to the one where we’d landed, a large defunct autoturret jutting up beyond it. The walls were lined with boxes.

Scud, there were so *many* of them. Taynix boxes from floor to ceiling, enough to house maybe a hundred taynix.

“Jorgen,” Rig said. “How are—”

“We lost Wandering Leaf,” I said. “Planetary weapon destroyed it.”

Rig’s eyes widened. “Is—”

“FM is fine,” I said. I probably should have led with that. If it had been Spensa, that was the first thing I’d want to hear. “But Winzik sent more reinforcements, and they may not be the last. We need to get more platforms over there.”

“Yeah, about that,” Rig said. “We have a small problem.” He gestured around him. “We don’t know what any of these boxes do, much less where we would get enough slugs to power them. I sent the transport ship back to collect the taynix on the base, but most of those belong to the remaining pilots. I’m not sure they’re going to part with them, not without a direct order from Stoff.”

Stoff might give such an order, but the more I involved him the more he’d feel he had to question me, which we did not have time for. The flights on Evershore could be dead by the time he made a decision. We’d also need the taynix with those pilots if we had to bring in more reinforcements.

I looked around at the boxes again. We’d sent expeditions down to the caverns to look for more slugs, but it was taking them time and I understood why. The slugs tended to hide in the less inhabited areas, and I’d been too busy to go down myself.

*Scud.* “Do you need to use all the boxes?” I asked Rig. “Can we figure out which one is the hyperdrive, then take the platform over and use the autocannons?”

“Maybe,” Rig said. “Even figuring out which is the hyperdrive is going to take time though. The boxes aren’t well labeled.”

Rig looked around, wringing his hands. I was putting a lot of pressure on him and demanding instant results. Just because we’d been able to pull ourselves out of some tight spots in the past didn’t mean he could produce miracles on demand.

“I know you’re doing your best,” I said. “I know you don’t have enough time or resources. You’re doing amazing work for us, and you’ve saved all our lives several times now. If you can’t figure this out it isn’t your fault, but I need you to try.”

“Of course,” Rig said. “We’re just not prepared for this.”

“What can I do?”

“Finding me more slugs would be nice.”

“Okay, let me see what I can do.” I moved out into the corridor. In the rooms along the hall, other engineers were calling to each other about the contents of each one. I peered through the nearest doorway.

Scud. More taynix boxes.

We were going to need a lot of help. Rig's team had done so much for us. Now it was time for me to come through for them.

I found a bench in the corridor and sat down, Juno hovering over my shoulder next to Boomslug.

"Do you have a meditation for searching?" I asked Juno.

"Not in this book," Juno said, "though most of them begin the same: 'Breathe in, breathe out. You are now completely relaxed.'"

I wasn't, but I tried anyway. I reached out over the planet, searching for that vibration, the one I'd heard in my dreams. The one that had called Spensa's great-grandmother to Detritus to begin with—the reason we'd arrived here.

It was still there, that resonance. We'd found some taynix, pulled them up from their mushroom-infested caves and brought them to live with us. But there were more down there, maybe a lot more.

*Help*, I called to them. *We need help*. It was hard to pinpoint the individual minds of the slugs—it always was, before I became familiar with them, and when there were so many together. I could feel them listening to me though. They were interested, but unmoved.

"Hey!" Rig said. "Get back here!"

I looked through the doorway to see Fine, our original comms slug, wriggling out of his grasp.

"Hey!" Fine shrieked at him. "Get back here!"

Snuggles disappeared from the crook of my arm and reappeared on the floor by Fine, and then picked him up and brought him to me.

"I'm trying to concentrate," I said.

"Sorry," Rig said. "I think I figured out which box is the hypercomm, but when I tried to test it he went crazy."

"Crazy!" Fine shouted.

Rig looked at him. Fine wasn't usually this agitated...

"Leave him," I said. "Try again in a minute when he calms down."

"Okay," Rig said. "Sure."

I reached down and petted Fine on his spines. This slug—in conjunction with Gill—had saved us on Sunreach. The least I could do was give him a little breathing room.

I reached toward the planet again, down toward the vibrations that were actually taynix. Many of them, beneath the surface, in caves we hadn't yet discovered. As I did I felt that texture again, the strange bumps in the nowhere—little ridges, all packed together in clumps below the surface of the planet. They weren't taynix—they didn't vibrate with energy. Instead they felt hollow, like little vessels waiting to be filled. The way they grouped together, thousands upon thousands of them, was familiar somehow. The shape of the gatherings. The pattern.

*Scud.* Those were the Defiant caverns. They were filled with thousands of *somethings*. They couldn't be delvers, could they? No, they were something else. Maybe—

Stars, were they *people*?

I focused on one little raised vessel, drawing close to it, examining it. It was...*thinking*. Its mother had set it here, and told it not to move until it was ready to apologize for hitting its brother. But it would never be ready to apologize, because its brother had really, really deserved it.

My mouth fell open. I wasn't supposed to be able to do that, was I? Find the minds of non-cytonics?

*Listen* to them?

"Juno," I said. "In your books, are there meditations for communicating with other people? People who don't have cytonic powers?"

"You communicate with them all the time," Juno said. "You use words."

"This is not the time to be pedantic!" I said. "Could your cytonics talk to other people mind-to-mind?"

Juno's little brow furrowed. "I have read that a few achieved it. But if there are meditations for that, I have not read them. As you are just learning, it seems like it might be wiser to try to stick to the more general skills, and not rely on those only a few were ever able to achieve."

That did seem wiser. And I hadn't *communicated* with that little kid, only listened to his thoughts. That could *also* be useful—scud, the espionage

possibilities were endless.

Now though, we had cities under attack on Evershore and a room full of empty taynix boxes. I searched for the slugs in the areas around the caverns. I felt the vibrations, concentrated in the caverns away from people. Minds that were smaller yet *louder*, projecting themselves into the nowhere instead of remaining self-contained.

I could figure out what to do with the rest of it later. For now I needed to focus on the taynix. I didn't know how many of them would come to me—they hadn't jumped on it the first time I asked, but maybe I could convince them.

*We need your help*, I said. *Please*.

Someone else reached for me, so near that I startled. Another cytonic mind joined my plea, and with it came an image.

Mushrooms. Caviar. Friends. Family. *Danger*. The fear was so strong, though the mind that sent it was small. I saw all of us crowded together on Sunreach, holding on to each other while Gill took us home.

*Help*. It wasn't a word so much as a feeling.

Fine was helping me. He was making a *case* for me, though not in so many words. Telling the other taynix he was happy here. That he liked us, that we treated him well and were good to him, that he *cared* about us.

*We care about you too*, I thought at him. FM cared most of all. I knew she thought I was heartless sometimes, but I didn't want anything terrible to happen to them if I could prevent it.

I didn't want anything terrible to happen to *anyone*.

Maybe when I was speaking to the taynix I should focus less on the words. Everything was translated to thoughts through the nowhere anyway—that was how Alanik and I could understand each other.

I focused on the idea of home—my home, and what it meant to me. The danger the Superiority posed to this planet we all shared. The power we had to stop it, but only with *help*.

It was more hope than I truly felt, but it was the message they needed and it wasn't a lie. It was simply a different way to tell the story.

*Do better than we did*.

“Scud!” Rig shouted, and I opened my eyes as hundreds of taynix all appeared in the corridor at once. They spilled into the various control rooms, all wriggling on top of one another. They were bunched together in groups, taynix of many colors all rolling and sliding away from the hyperslugs they’d been huddled around.

The ones who could hyperjump had answered me, and they’d brought friends.

There were so *many* of them. Commslugs, and mindblade slugs, and the hyperslugs too, of course. Also the blue and green kind we’d found on Wandering Leaf, the ones that powered inhibitors. It made sense there were some on Detritus—there had to be a few somewhere, enabling our cytonic inhibitor.

But there were more still. Wrinkled grey ones with black and white spines, several with spines that faded between the many colors of the rainbow, and a strange set of mostly blackish ones that shone an iridescent blue under the control room lights. Some of the slugs were significantly smaller than the others, teal colored with pink spines. Were those babies, or a smaller variety?

The other humans and I all stared at the slugs dumbly. While we did, Boomslug, Fine, and Snuggles jumped into action. Snuggles teleported Boomslug right into the middle of the taynix. Snuggles started touching slugs and hyperjumping them into the control rooms, gathering them in front of the boxes, while Boomslug herded groups of them together with the light touch of a blunt mindblade. The other slugs slithered out of his way, heading in the directions he sent them. Through the nowhere I could feel Fine sending them all feelings and images. Danger. Help. Hurry.

“Um,” Rig said. “I know I asked you for more slugs, but I really don’t know which boxes to put them in. I have no idea what some of these slugs would *do*, even if we did figure out where to put them.”

“Do your best,” I said. “They came to help, and we need all the help we can get.”

## Sixteen

Rig and the engineers started working on where to put the slugs. We'd only need a few to move our platforms, but I wasn't going to complain about having access to extras. Meanwhile, I reached toward Evershore to contact Alanik.

*Report?* I asked her.

*We're managing,* Alanik said. *But there were a lot of ships in that last carrier. I don't think we can handle another without reinforcements. Will Rig be able to move the platforms?*

*We've summoned help,* I said, watching the slugs writhing about in the control rooms. *But it's going to take some time. I can send over another few flights, but I'm worried that the enemy is going to keep coming. Do you think Rinakin would send some of your people to help?*

*I can make a case for it,* Alanik said. *It would be best if I went in person.*

*Ask Arturo if he can spare you,* I said. *I'll send in reinforcements as soon as I can.*

*Will do,* Alanik said.

*Help!* a voice said. It came from near Alanik, somewhere on Evershore—the voices I'd heard before. *Help!*

I didn't have time to help voices I didn't know. Enough corporeal people were in danger.

*We know,* the voices said. *We want to help!*

*Who are you?* I asked, but the voices faded again.

I didn't have time to figure out where they was coming from. Gran-Gran had heard voices calling for help before she'd had what appeared to be a hyperjumping accident. I still couldn't rule out a Superiority trap, so I needed to focus on the help I knew I could trust.

I used my radio to put in a call to Command, asking them to get another three flights in the air. They agreed immediately—apparently Stoff hadn't

rethought the length of the rope he'd given me to hang myself with. The other flights had all been put on alert, so it wouldn't take long for them to get in their ships, but I couldn't return to Evershore without them.

While I was still here—

“Rig,” I said. “I don't want to scare you, but I'm going to try something.”

Rig poked his head out of the command room. “Something more scary than dumping hundreds of unknown taynix at our feet?”

“Potentially,” I said. “Or maybe nothing will happen. I don't know.”

“So either you're going to scare me or nothing will happen.”

“Right,” I said. “You can keep working. I just wanted to warn you.”

“About potentially nothing.”

Stars, I shouldn't have said anything. It would have taken less time. “Exactly. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

Rig gave me a very confused look and went back to examining the taynix boxes. I closed my eyes and focused on the now-overwhelming cytonic resonance all around me. The times I'd felt the strange ridges, I'd been listening to the nowhere the way Gran-Gran taught me.

“Can I assist you, shadow-walker?” Juno asked.

It was only then that I realized that Juno hadn't remarked on the sudden arrival of a horde of gastropods, most of them bigger than he was. He didn't seem shocked by much of anything, taking it all in quietly through that eye slit in his armor.

“I don't know,” I said. “I'm trying that advanced thing you said wasn't wise.”

“You've done a great many things I thought were unwise,” Juno said. “But it seems to be working for you so far.”

I hoped the trend continued. I focused on the vibrations. I located Boomslug and Snuggles, and they seemed to sense that I was reaching for them, because they returned to my shoulders. They each had their own type of hum that was distinct, the way every human has a slightly different voice. It was almost like FM's music, harmonious in its own subtle way.

I stretched my mind, trying to push past the vibrations, and searched for those ridges again, the ones that were so still and quiet. I gripped the edge



of the bench in frustration—I'd done it when I wasn't meaning to. I should be able to do it on purpose.

I remembered what Alanik had told me back on ReDawn. *Try, Jorgen, she'd said. Stop focusing so much on what you aren't able to do, and try.*

"Hey, Juno?" I said. "Can you read me one of those meditations again?"

"Of course," Juno said. "Breathe in, breathe out..."

I did that all day, every day of my life, but this time I tried to really focus on it. I tried to let go of everything I wished I could do, all the ways I could solve our problems if I were only better, stronger, smarter.

*Do better than we did,* my mother said.

For the moment I tried to let go of whether I could. I listened to the slugs, to their vibrations, to their hums.

"See yourself walking along a beach," Juno said. "With each breath, the waves wash in, and the waves wash out."

I tried to hear the ocean, to really be there, be present and let go of the frustration of everything I couldn't yet do.

*In order to achieve control,* Juno had said, *you must first accept that you have none.*

*I have none,* I told myself. And for the first time, instead of terror and frustration accompanying that thought, I felt relief.

"Feel the wind on your skin," Juno said. "The heat of the sun as it burns down from above."

"Above!" Snuggles said.

And then, all at once, the ridges appeared around me. Not nearly so many as I'd felt down beneath the surface. Only half a dozen moving about the platform. Minds, so quiet but no less real. I approached the one in the room nearest me and listened. This mind was working through a complex calculation, trying to figure out which of the wires from the taynix boxes went into which of the many holoprojectors labeled along the wall. *Why couldn't someone have labeled these effectively?* they were thinking. *Did the labels disintegrate maybe? Surely they had to have—*

*Rig?* I asked.

The thought stuttered to a stop.

*Jorgen?* Rig said. *Are you inside my mind?*

*Apparently,* I said.

*Okay, yeah,* Rig said. *This is deeply terrifying.* He paused. *Is this what it's like for you and Alanik all the time?*

I laughed and let the link drop. Rig appeared in the doorway. "Jorgen," he said. "What the scud did you do?"

"I think I did something really advanced," I said. "Something Juno didn't think I should try."

"Hmph," Juno said. "I never said you *shouldn't* do it. I only said I thought there were better exercises to try first."

This one, though, seemed like it could be an asset at the moment.

I radioed Command. "How are those flights coming?"

"They're in the air," the Command staffer replied. "Working on the light-lance connections before they give the go-ahead to hyperjump."

"Excellent."

I closed my eyes again, trying to see if I could still find the ridges. They were faint but they were there, easier to recall now that I'd brought them up once.

*Help!* A faint whisper, calling to me through the nowhere. *Help us,* the voices said again. *We want to help.*

I sighed. I had no idea where those voices were coming from, much less if I should respond—

*Listen, boy,* another voice said.

Scud. That was—*Gran-Gran?*

She didn't answer, but an image formed in my mind, clear as anything.

A picture of the portal in the library, the strange wall with the lines, the gateway into the nowhere.

*Gran-Gran,* I said. *What happened when you appeared near the portal? Where are you?*

She didn't—or couldn't—answer.

"Jerkface," Steadman from Command said over my radio. "The flights are ready for hyperjump."

“Good,” I said. *Rig, how much longer do you think it will take you to figure out if we can move the platforms?*

*We’re going to need time,* Rig said. *I can’t tell you how much, but I can keep you posted.*

And he could do it without a hypercomm now.

*Okay,* I said. *I’ll check in.*

I put a hand on Juno’s platform, and instructed Snuggles to take us to the beach on Evershore near the wreckage of my starfighter. We passed beneath the eyes, and then the sand of Evershore formed beneath my feet, the roaring of the ocean loud in my ears.

I reached toward Platform Prime, finding the taynix belonging to those flights. Corgi was among them, I thought, though I couldn’t remember the rest of their names. FM would know. She knew them all.

I gave the taynix a clear image of Snuggles. And a moment later three flights of ships—light-lanced together in three distinct groups—appeared over the sand, some of them extending out over the waves.

“Amphi,” I said over my radio, “I brought backup.”

“Platforms?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Three flights of ships. Can you get them up to speed?”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Arturo said.

My proximity sensors had been busted when the cytonic slashed their mindblades through my dash. I looked up at the dark sky, trying to read what was going on with the battle.

Scud, there were a lot of ships up there. Our side seemed to be holding their own, but we needed the backup badly.

*Alanik,* I said, *status?*

*Rinakin is sending ships to support us. He says the kitsen alliance is worth the risk. I told him you were going to bring platforms from Detritus. Did I lie to him?*

*Rig is working on it,* I said. *Can you come support Arturo?*

*I’m on my way,* Alanik said. *I’ll come back for the flights after they’ve had a few minutes to prepare.*

*Good,* I said. *Keep me updated.*

“Should we have brought you a new ship?” Juno asked.

“I’ll get one later,” I said. “Right now I need to have a look at that portal in your library.”

## Seventeen

“The portal?” Juno said. “This seems like an odd time—”

“I know,” I said. “But I think it’s important.” My mindblades could help in the battle, but we needed more than that. We needed Cobb’s command expertise. We had to get him back in charge of this battle, of the war.

The medtechs would be crowded into the library with Gran-Gran and Cobb, and I didn’t want Snuggles to accidentally land us on top of one of the stretchers. Instead I put a hand on Juno’s platform and had Snuggles hyperjump us to a foothold I could see at the top of the cliffs. From this vantage I could see the staircase that led to the library, and I had Snuggles make a second jump to land us outside the domed doors.

I reached down below my knees for the handle, but found the door locked.

I knocked, and there was a scuffling inside.

A moment later the door cracked open. On the other side Cuna stooped down, looking out at us, and then opened the door the rest of the way. “I didn’t think that Winzik would knock,” they said. “But one can never be sure.”

“Not Winzik,” I said, crawling into the room.

Kel and Winnow knelt between the long tables, which had been scooted together so the stretchers holding Cobb and Gran-Gran could rest on top. Several of the kitsen doctors sat on the stretchers, helping the medtechs monitor Cobb and Gran-Gran, while their transport pilot, callsign: Zing, listened to the radio that was perched on a glass case filled with very small books. I could hear Arturo giving orders to the new flights. Hopefully the additional ships would help us hold out a while longer while Rig figured out the platform.

“How are they doing?” I asked Winnow.

“Stable,” she said. “You were right—moving them didn’t cause them to deteriorate this time. It’s possible we could put them in a ship now.”

“I don’t want to move them while we’re under attack,” I said. “And I don’t think it’s the time that made the difference. I think it was the direction. Farther from that.” I indicated the wall, and the medtechs only looked more confused.

“What is that?” Cuna asked.

“A portal to the nowhere,” I said. “I think.”

I was becoming increasingly sure that Gran-Gran—or her spirit? her soul?—was behind this wall. I hoped Cobb was there with her, that non-cytonics could even exist in that strange place. We’d learned from the datanets that the Superiority had mines in the nowhere and ran entire operations to get acclivity stone. They probably used people who weren’t cytonic on those missions.

Of course, those people probably had *bodies*, so it wasn’t a perfect comparison. Still, I suspected the kitsen cytonics were lost in there too. I didn’t know how they could have survived all this time, but it seemed likely those were the voices I was hearing.

I looked up at the portal, at the strange mass of interconnected lines running all over the wall. I could feel the vibrations of the nowhere, but not Gran-Gran’s distinct signature.

“Quiet, please,” Juno said to the others. “The shadow-walker must concentrate.”

Zing turned off the radio, and everyone else was silent. That was helpful, if a little presumptuous of Juno. Usually *he* was the one chattering and distracting me.

I considered the portal. Spensa said if I got too close I might fall in. There was a draw to that—the idea that if I got lost in the nowhere I could see Spensa again. But I had no idea if I would be able to find her, and I couldn’t leave while Evershore was in peril, my friends in jeopardy.

Instead I reached out to the wall with my mind, inspecting it.

*Are you there?* I asked.

The answer was immediate. *We’re here. We want to help.*

The kitsen cytonics had been gone for centuries, Juno said. Cytonic powers were genetic, so if the kitsen cytonics had all been lost somehow, it made sense no more had been born. Though...Spensa had said she thought living near a portal could change some people into cytonics; why hadn't that happened to any of the lorekeepers?

An image struck me. Voices calling out of the portal for years and years, but there was no one left on the other side who could hear. Eventually they stopped calling.

Stars, was I imagining that? Or...*reading* it somehow? I needed to reach them, but I didn't want to get lost in there. If I could find Spensa, could she find them in the nowhere and help me somehow? Together maybe we could find a way to get them all out at once.

I reached across the nowhere, searching for Spensa. I'd found her before, even if our connection was strange and distant.

Something reached back. It was another image of Spensa cleaning a piece of a ship, a different one from the last time. I'd been too distracted before to think about the significance of that. We had ground crews for that, but Spin didn't have those in the nowhere. Did she have a ship? I thought she'd lost M-Bot on Starsight, and that was how the Superiority got hold of his holographic projector.

The image was hazy, but the *feeling* that went with it was unmistakable. Loneliness. Loss. A fog of forgetfulness, like the stupor of coming out of an illness and not really being sure how many days had passed. It was so un-Spensa-like that it floored me.

When I talked to Spensa before, she was right there, face-to-face with me. This was so much more distant, almost like a memory.

As if it came from someone else, someone watching her from the outside.

*Who is this?* I asked.

I felt a tingle of...amusement maybe? And then an image came into my mind of a hyperslug sitting on the control panel of my starfighter. "Jerkface!" it cried at me.

*Doomslug?* I asked.

The tingle of amusement grew stronger.

Huh. I'd apparently found Doomslug in the nowhere. It made sense that she'd left with Spensa, but the fact that I could contact her and not Spensa herself was more than a little concerning.

*Is Spensa okay?* I asked.

The amusement faded, replaced by a sadness, a loneliness.

Saints. *What can I do?* I asked.

A trickle of doubt. Doomslug didn't know.

I sent a picture of the portal in front of me. *Do you know how to open it?* I asked her.

I heard nothing in response, except maybe a tiny bit of confusion. Either she didn't understand, or she didn't know.

"Are you learning anything from staring at the portal?" Juno asked. "I don't mean to interrupt a shadow-walker at work, but—"

"Oh," I said, shaking myself. "I was listening."

"To the silence?" Winnow asked.

"No," I said. "To a taynix. But I don't think she's going to help us here." Though if I could figure out how to open the portal, I still might be able to use it to get Spensa and Doomslug home.

"Did you want to try another meditation?" Juno asked.

"Do you have any meditations for traveling to the nowhere?" I asked.

"There are many meditations for hyperjumps," Juno said. "I could select one of my favorites."

Learning to hyperjump without a taynix would be useful, but it wasn't what I was after here. "Hyperjumping is moving *through* the nowhere," I said. "I need to be able to move *into* it. And ideally back out again." That was the important part, really.

Juno paused. "'In and back out again' sounds indistinguishable from 'through.'"

I blinked at him. I supposed it did. "When we hyperjump, we pass beneath the eyes, but there's no one else there. This time I want to *stop* while I'm in there and help my people escape—and the kitsen cytonics too."



Cuna and the medtechs all looked at each other. The medtechs, at least, seemed to think I had lost my mind. I was the scudding commander of this battle, and here I was staring at walls and claiming to hear things while everyone else was fighting. I would have thought the same thing in their place, and maybe they were right. If anyone got hurt up there while I was chasing shadows, it would be my fault. I'd never forgive myself.

"You really believe that our shadow-walkers still live, trapped on the other side of this portal."

"Yes," I said.

*Help us*, they called.

I picked up Snuggles, and she nuzzled my wrist.

Juno steered his platform over to the glass case filled with books and opened it, extracting a volume. The thing was as thick as three of my fingers together, but no larger than the palm of my hand. It still looked enormous in Juno's paws. "Let me find one of those meditations."

I wasn't sure a meditation was what I needed, not for this. Instead I took a step closer to the portal.

"Shadow-walker?" Juno said. "Are you sure you wish to get closer? If you truly believe it to be a portal into the nowhere—"

"Spensa said a cytonic could fall through it," I said. "And maybe that's what happened to your people long ago. But if I don't at least try to interact with it, how can I reach them?"

I walked between the stretchers holding Gran-Gran and Cobb and moved up to the portal, careful not to step on any of the tiny tables or chairs or carts covered in books. I walked within arm's length of the portal and examined it.

I *could* feel them. Kitsen, many of them. I felt their sorrow and their frustration, trapped behind the portal. Generations of them, some born behind the portal and unable to ever leave. Some had died, while others had learned to extend their lives. They'd been sucked in and trapped, leaving no one on the other side who could hear them, their planet devoid of cytonics for centuries.

*Until now, one of them whispered. I could feel their hope, and their disbelief.*

*And then suddenly a familiar voice filled my mind. It's about scudding time you listened, Spensa's grandmother said. I am too old to be trapped in here for eternity with gerbils, and too set in my ways to live to be two hundred, even if I could figure out what in the stars they're talking about.*

*Scud. Gran-Gran, I said. Are you in there? We found your body and Cobb's. How did you—*

*I was trying to follow the voices, Gran-Gran said. And I followed them all right. Right into the same scudding trap. Never listen to a rodent who asks for your help. Let that be a lesson.*

*I supposed I had volunteered to help rodents, but I didn't regret it.*

*Is Cobb okay? I asked.*

*He's here, Gran-Gran said. Growing grumpier by the hour. The kitsen say they're not sure our bodies could have survived out there. They say we might be dead.*

*You're not dead, I said. But why did this happen?*

*I couldn't figure out how to pinpoint a location to hyperjump to, Gran-Gran said. But I could hear the voices calling to me. So I tried to go to them instead.*

*Oh, stars. I haven't been able to figure out how to do that either, I said. It doesn't make sense when Alanik describes it. That was clever, trying to move toward the voices instead.*

*It would have been, Gran-Gran said. Except when we got here, our bodies were gone.*

*They're trapped outside the portal, I said. This was why we had to hyperjump to places we knew, or places we could see. Gran-Gran had tried to go somewhere unfamiliar, somewhere she couldn't physically hyperjump to—and it had only partially worked. I think trying to hyperjump through the portal severed your soul in half.*

*Sounds like the sort of thing that could kill a person, Gran-Gran said.*

*That it did, though it hadn't killed them yet. But scud, how long could they survive like this, half in and half out of the nowhere? I wouldn't have*

thought such a thing was possible.

I could see the other side of the portal in my mind now. It looked like Evershore, a sandy island in an ocean of nothing. It looked...oddly corporeal for a place called the nowhere.

I understood. "They accidentally closed the door behind them," I said. "They were trapped, with no one left on this side to let them through." They'd remained there, huddled together, for so many years.

Scud. That was incredible. The *knowledge* these kitsen must have.

Through the portal, I could feel the despair of the kitsen as their kinsmen died, their fear that they would all perish behind the portal, that their long life would run out, that they didn't have enough people to breed and sustain their numbers. That the line of kitsen cytonics would come to an end, long after the rest of their people had supposed it had. They'd been searching for help for so long, and now they were weary. So weary. Gran-Gran was among them, and they were afraid her end would come even faster, separated from her body as she was.

Juno had piled several books onto his platform, so many that he barely fit in the center in his suit of power armor. He held one of the new books open in his gauntleted paws, floating over to me.

"The waves of the ocean wash upon you," Juno said.

"I thought you didn't have a meditation for this," I said.

"I don't," he said. "But the last one seemed to help you even though it was not specific. This is a meditation for the ages. One that is meant to sharpen your mind and your focus, to bring out your best potential. I don't have the answer for you, but you may find the answer for yourself."

Huh.

"Should I go on?" Juno asked.

I didn't see what it could hurt. "Yes," I said.

"The waves of the ocean wash upon you, but they have no power to drag you away. You are one with the waves, and you are one with yourself. You are eternal, relentless as the rising sun. Your heart beats with the rhythm of the stars."

I still wasn't relaxed—when was the last scudding time I had been relaxed?—but I could hear it, the rhythm Juno was talking about. The vibration of the stars. The heartbeat of the universe. I could hear it in the tainix, and in the battle above. I could feel it from the portal, brimming with power.

I felt a nudge at the edge of my mind. It was that image of Spensa again, lost and alone. No, not alone. Doomslug was with her, and M-Bot, though I didn't know how that worked if M-Bot's ship had been dismantled by the Superiority. I couldn't help Spensa, couldn't reach her. I didn't know how to do anything except—

*Take care of her*, I said to Doomslug.

And then something shifted, and Doomslug teased a thread out of Spensa's thoughts and passed it on to me, clear and powerful as anything.

Stars, it was her memory of *me*. She was forgetting herself, her friends, her family, everything, but she still remembered *me*. She *cared* about me, deeply and with a ferocity that was totally and uniquely Spin.

That made me incredibly lucky. More so than I'd ever be able to express.

I felt a swell of agreement from Doomslug; she would take care of Spensa. But it was accompanied by gratitude that I already was.

*Thank you*, I said. I tried to hold on to that snatch of memory, to cling to what little I had left of Spensa, not sure if I'd ever see her again. But it was slipping away along with Doomslug, back into the nowhere.

Doomslug faded, but the portal remained, pulsing with power, with a rhythm all its own—a rhythm that felt familiar somehow, like a melody I'd heard before.

“You yield to the universe,” Juno went on, though I'd missed some of what he said, “not because of its power, but because of your wisdom. You yield power over all things, and in doing so become one with the stars—”

I felt the impenetrability of the portal, the lock that kept me from pushing through. I didn't know if I could fall through, or if it prevented entry from both sides.

I couldn't open the portal, I realized, because I lacked the key. Similar to the impression that let us use our powers inside a cytonic inhibitor, there

was some kind of cytonic vibration that would open the portal, letting the kitsen pass through.

“Juno,” I said. “Do your people have any kind of recordings from the days before the kitsen cytonics disappeared? Some kind of database, or digital records?”

“We do not,” Juno said. “We lost much when we were colonized, and more in the War of Liberation.”

Stars. I didn’t even know if such a recording had ever existed. The kitsen had become stuck, after all. They might never have been fully capable of traveling in and out. I didn’t know how to get in and out of a portal, and since Alanik hadn’t recognized it, she wouldn’t know either. She hadn’t even been able to *hear* the kitsen.

I could feel the sense of failure pushing in around the edges, the sense that I never had enough to give, never had the right pieces at the right moments to really come through for the people I cared about. FM was right though. Sometimes I did. But the failures loomed so much larger than the successes that it was easy to forget.

“You are completely relaxed,” Juno said.

I *tried* to relax. I didn’t need to solve all the problems on my own. I was supposed to lean on the people around me for help, and while no one on this side of the portal had the information I needed...

*I want to help you,* I said. *But I don’t know how to open this portal.*

I felt despair from the other side. Weariness. The burden of centuries spent watching, wondering, hoping and then losing hope, and struggling to find it again and again. A picture formed in my mind—a wrinkled kitsen watching her friends and loved ones die, knowing others were dying on the other side of the portal as time passed, knowing she would never see them again. The occasional glimpse of a cytonic nearby—probably Superiority ships visiting the planet. But they never heard, and they never came to help.

Then a voice, far away. A woman who had spent her lifetime listening finally heard them.

And now she was trapped somehow, strangely separated from her body. Regret, a sense that reaching out was selfish, because she and Cobb had

now suffered their same fate.

“The stars shine upon you, an ancient light in the darkness,” Juno continued. “The darkness widens to swallow them, but they shine endlessly on.”

*We’re going to get you out*, I said. It was a promise I didn’t know I could keep, more a message of determination than of certainty. *How did you get in there?*

What followed wasn’t words so much as images. A summit. A room full of kitsen, each bringing their unique talents, knowledge, and abilities. They meditated together, sharing their knowledge, their scribes writing furiously to contain it all.

They toyed with the threads of the universe, the barrier between our world and the nowhere. I could feel the memories now, not only from the old kitsen but embedded in the portal itself, as if it were *made* of experiences.

Together the kitsen had picked at the boundary, separated the threads. They’d meant only to figure out how to visit that realm for a time, the way the legends said their people did when they first met humans. But instead they opened the gaping maw of nothingness and it swallowed them all, along with a large chunk of their world.

Stars, the chasm this library was built in. It was formed when the kitsen left the somewhere, taking the stone of the cliffs *with* them.

“You look up at their lights,” Juno said, “letting their vibrations wash over you. You too are eternal like the stars, a piece of the endless *something* that makes space for the *nothing*, but never yields to it.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but I tried not to focus too hard on it. I concentrated instead on the threads that made up the border, infused with memory, vibrating so strongly as if the nowhere wanted to burst out of the portal. I didn’t want it to swallow Dreamspring, didn’t want to open the entire thing.

Just enough for those trapped on the other side to come through.

I could feel Gran-Gran listening, noticing what I was doing as I began to manipulate the threads. The way Alanik described the boundary—it was

like listening to a description of an ocean when I was young. I never really understood until I saw it for myself. But I could *feel* the boundary between the realms. I might not be able to carry myself through, but here I had power.

*I tried to give you the story you needed,* Gran-Gran said. *I told you to imagine yourself flying among the stars.*

I remembered Gran-Gran's story, about how disobeying orders could be the right thing to do.

*Wait until you hear what I've done,* I said.

*I can see it,* she said. *I tried to give you the story you needed, but perhaps you've found your own story after all.*

Had I? I could feel the way the threads of the boundary wove together, sealing the portal. I didn't know how to move them, but I focused on them the way I had the birds. That image wasn't quite right for this, so I tried vines all woven together, creating a wall between us and them. I didn't want to cut the vines down, only move a few aside, forming a small area where the kitsen could return, where Gran-Gran and Cobb could slip through.

"You are the light and the darkness," Juno said. "You are the place where the two worlds meet. The intersection of what is, and what could be."

*Spensa flies among the stars,* Gran-Gran said. *But you build things up from the ground. She is a warrior, and you are a defender. It's a different kind of story.*

*I can't protect them all,* I said.

*You can't,* Gran-Gran said. *We all have our own burdens, even if we carry them differently.*

I thought about the way I'd lost it in the senate meeting. *I'm not carrying mine well,* I said.

*Ah,* Gran-Gran said. *Well, you're not alone in that.*

I hated it. I wanted to get it right, to get everything right. But maybe sometimes there *was* no right. There was only the best I could do.

I pictured the vines and touched them each in turn, trying to see which would shift and which held fast. I was able to bring one to the side, creating

the smallest part in the jungle of them, but there were more vines on the other side, ones I couldn't reach.

I couldn't do this alone. I needed help.

I reached out to the old kitsen on the other side of the portal, trying to show her what I saw. Her mind seemed to receive it, as if she also knew the barrier well, had been over these same vines thousands of times. I showed her the ones I could move, and I felt her study them.

And then the ones on the other side began to shift.

I focused on the vines I could control, feeling the vibrations, holding fast the ones that supported the entire structure while manipulating those that only supported tiny bits of it.

"You are completely relaxed," Juno said.

I breathed in rhythm with the vibrations. I wasn't relaxed, but I was calm. I was at peace. I *was* the power.

And then all at once, the smooth surface of the portal cracked open, and a kitsen hobbled through. Her fur was greying and her skin was so wrinkled it folded down over her eyes. She pushed it back and looked up at us.

And then a dozen more followed.



## Eighteen

More kitsen crowded into the area in front of the portal, all blinking at each other and at us. Several of them hummed with a cytonic vibration, though some of the younger-looking ones didn't. Non-cytonics who'd been born on the other side of the portal, who'd lived their whole lives there.

Juno nearly fell off his platform. He bumped his stack of books and had to snatch at them to keep them from sliding over the edge. He started fumbling through his book, like perhaps he needed a meditation to calm himself.

"Human!" the one with the wrinkled skin said to me. "Are you the one who released us?"

"Yes," I said. "I can't believe...I can't believe that worked."

I looked down at Cobb and Gran-Gran, but they lay still with their eyes closed. Scud, had it *not* worked for them?

No. Wait. I could feel something, a signature emanating from Gran-Gran. That had to mean...

Cobb stirred, and then he coughed. Kel bent over the screen that showed his vitals.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"He's improving," Kel said.

"Will he wake up?"

"I don't know. But if he does, he'll be in no condition to help. We should get them home to Detritus."

Stars. Of course he wouldn't be in any condition to lead. He'd spent the last *two days* with his mind disconnected from his body.

A loud boom sounded through the walls of the library, as if the stone above us had been struck—probably by a falling starfighter.

Zing turned the radio back on, and the airwaves were a mess of talking.

I didn't want to take the time to sort that out. *Alanik*, I said, *how's it going with those reinforcements?*

*The UrDail flights have joined the battle*, she said. *What are you doing down there?*

*Found us some more backup*, I said. Cuna had bent down to the level of some of the kitsen cytonics and was conversing with them quietly. I hoped to all the stars in the sky they weren't calling them "lesser."

*That's good, because we need help.*

Scud. *Sitrep?*

*Three more carrier ships. No planetary weapons yet, but Arturo is worried. Something about a bomb.*

Oh no. *What bomb?*

*He said he spotted a ship with a strange flight pattern.*

My whole body went cold. I focused, widening my reach—

And I found the impressions again, the minds of the pilots, all flying around in what felt like disarray.

No, there was a method to it. Arturo had them divided into flanking groups and the flights were working together, though I couldn't pinpoint the strategy at a glance. If Arturo had seen what I thought he'd seen, I didn't have time to consider it. I found his mind flying near Alanik. As I drew closer I could feel his focus, his determination.

And his *terror*. He didn't know where I was, wasn't sure what they should do. He spotted that ship again, moving slowly in a familiar pattern he'd never wanted to see again—I could see it in his mind. We'd fought a lot of those ships in our days as cadets, though we hadn't seen one since we'd driven the Krell away from the surface of Detritus.

It looked like a lifebuster.

*Amphi?* I said.

I felt Arturo startle.

*Jerkface?* he said. *Are you in my scudding head?*

*Apparently*, I said. *You saw a lifebuster?*

*Yeah. It's moving slowly like they do, but it's headed toward Dreamspring. Kimmalyn and Nedd are keeping an eye on it.*

I closed my eyes. A bomb of that size could take out the whole island, maybe more. Such an impact would have been big enough to cave in the caverns below the surface of Detritus—I didn't want to see what it would do to the kitsen city, how far the devastation would reach.

We'd have to be very careful taking that down.

When I opened my eyes again, several of the kitsen cytonics had disappeared and the others were moving toward the exit. Juno had landed his platform and was powering up some of the floating disks that would let them reach the top library shelves, and the kitsen cytonics were boarding them.

They were going to help, but if we let a bomb hit the city that wouldn't be enough to stop it.

I turned to the medtechs and Cuna. "Stay here," I said. "Get Cobb on the radio the *minute* he's awake."

"Yes, sir," Kel and Winnow said. They didn't tell me again that he needed more rest. We all needed a lot of things we weren't getting tonight. Survival took priority.

Juno climbed back onto his platform and hovered up to my shoulder.

"You could stay here," I said. "It would be safer."

"You are the Restorer of Lost Souls," Juno said solemnly. "He Who Harkens unto Silent Voices, Opener of Locked Doors. Where you go, I will go, shadow-walker." He still had his platform piled high with books, and I wanted to tell him I didn't think those would be helpful to bring, but they'd done all right for us so far.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go." I put a hand on Juno's platform and asked Snuggles to take us to my ship on the beach. I wanted to get a better picture of what was happening.

We appeared next to the wreckage of my starship, and I tried not to focus on the body that must still be lying on the sand somewhere behind me. Several kitsen ships flew down the beach, fleeing the city. None of them looked like fighters, and one was nothing more than a water tank bolted to a floating pedestal. It didn't move as fast as the others, but it was carrying five kitsen all packed together inside. If the bomb hit, I hoped they could

get far enough away, but I wasn't sure there was any place far enough, not on this island.

The sky above the city was full of ships—Superiority, human, UrDail, and kitsen. I could feel some of the kitsen cytonics—those who could hyperjump—already moving around in the gunships above, and one shot forth a flurry of mindblades, cutting an enemy fighter to pieces. Another disappeared and then reappeared on the other side of the battlefield, catching an enemy ship with its shield down in a barrage of destructor fire. The wreckage fell from the sky.

This was good. The contributions of the kitsen cytonics would give my flight some time to deal with the lifebuster without losing ground to the Superiority. I wanted to return to Detritus for a ship, but every second counted. I leaned against the damaged fuselage as I reached out to Arturo again. *How far out is that ship?*

*Too close, Arturo said. Hard to say without Command to run numbers, but if we bring it down I can't guarantee it won't destroy the city.*

It must not have reached optimal placement yet, because they were still bringing it closer before detonating. I had no idea how much time we had, but if we couldn't shoot the ship down without the risk of destroying Dreamspring, we had better work fast.

*Have Nedder engage his IMP, I told him. Then Quirk can shoot the ship down and someone can grab the bomb with a light-lance. The safest place to take it will be out of the atmosphere.*

Spensa had managed to carry one off once and survive, but it was dangerous. If the bomb was on a timer and that person didn't get out before it exploded, they'd be gone.

Arturo didn't like that idea. He knew that was what had to be done, he was just terrified to do it. *I'll take the bomb*, he said.

*No, I told him. You're in command. You have to give it to someone else.*

*The hell I do, Arturo said. If someone needs to risk their life like that, I'll do it.*

*No, I told him. You won't. That's an order.*

Arturo cursed me out, and I understood. It was terrible telling your friends they had to be the ones to do it. Any of them would though. In a heartbeat.

*Have Alanik carry the bomb, I said. She doesn't have to use a hyperdrive to get out. Might save her the half second of communication time.*

Scud, Arturo hated that even more. He was...oh, he was *attached* to Alanik. Nothing was going on between them yet, but he hoped for it.

*I'm sorry, I told him. Spensa didn't need me to order her to get into trouble, but it hadn't been easy flying with her, knowing I might be the one to give her the order that got her killed. I get it.*

*I know you do, Arturo said. I'll take care of it.*

I pulled back, away from Arturo's fear and pain. I tuned my handheld radio to our general channel—I wanted everyone to hear this next part, and that was the fastest way to talk to all of them at once.

“Kauri,” I said, “do you copy?”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Kauri said. “We've called in as many ships as we can. We have more, but they aren't fighters.”

If we sent civilian ships, we'd be needlessly throwing away lives. “Are you in contact with your senate?”

“I am,” she said. “They have taken shelter, but they have encouraged us to defend the planet. They fear if we surrender, the Superiority will destroy us anyway.”

The ivory moonlight glinted off the shards of the canopy on my broken ship. “That's exactly what will happen,” I said. “I want you to extend them an offer of evacuation. We can grant your leaders safe harbor. Detritus has a shield. It's protected. We could get your senate out. Their families. *Your* family. Maybe some civilians from Dreamspring. We will continue to fight here, but I don't know if we'll be able to save the city, and at least this way your government will survive. Some of your people will make it out.”

We could fit a lot of kitsen on a human transport ship. We had the one we'd brought to carry Cobb and Gran-Gran. I could go get another or send someone else to get one. With a hyperdrive we might be able to get some of the kitsen out before the lifebuster arrived.

“I will send word to the senate of your offer,” Kauri said. “Thank you for your generosity.”

I believed her gratitude was genuine, but her voice sounded frightened. I didn’t blame her.

“Tell them to hurry,” I said. “I’ll have a transport ship meet them at the senate meeting hall.”

“Thank you,” Kauri said.

I looked up at the sky again. Wreckage smashed against the cliff maybe half a klick from me. I thought it was UrDail, but I couldn’t be sure.

“Jerkface?” Arturo said. “What can we do to support the evacuation?”

“I want FM and Sentry to land and orchestrate the evacuation effort,” I said. “Can you spare them?”

“Yes,” Arturo said.

“Good. FM, Sentry, get as many kitsen leaders on board the medical transport ship as you can. Alanik or I will jump them out as soon as the ship is full. We’re going to need plenty of cover over Dreamspring while we evacuate. Everyone you can spare.”

“I’ll tell them,” Arturo said.

“Are we planning to pull back?” FM asked.

“No,” I said. “But if that bomb hits the island, I want to have saved as many people as possible.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” FM said. “We’re on it.”

I saw FM’s and Sadie’s ships soaring down out of the sky above the city to land near the senate building. If anyone would do their best to save literally everyone they could, it was FM.

I reached out. *Alanik*, I said. *Status?*

*We’re coming up on the bomb*, she said. *Shield is down. Kimmalyne—she hit the ship!*

Alanik dropped off, probably swooping in with her light hook, and I reached out to the minds around her, finding Arturo.

Scud, his whole mind was lit up with fear. I watched through his eyes as Alanik caught the lifebuster with her light hook and disappeared, taking it up into the vacuum.

*She's got it*, Arturo said. He was wound tight, and I almost asked Juno to read him a meditation.

It wouldn't help. Not in a situation like this. I could feel the others, I realized. Kimmaly, Nedd, T-Stall, Catnip—all of us holding our breath. They wouldn't relax until—

I felt Alanik emerge on the other side of the battlefield. *She's back*, I said.

The lifebuster flashed across the sky with its three distinct explosions. I felt profound relief, not only from Arturo but from all of us. We could do this now. We should still load that ship for evac just in case, but without that bomb—

Oh, *scud*.

I watched in horror as the Superiority ships began to scatter, spreading out away from the island. There were more carrier ships in the sky now, belching forth more fighters, but they were all fanning out, moving away from Dreamspring. What the hell were they doing?

*They're spreading us thin*, Arturo said. *They know they don't have to defeat us to win. We're protecting Dreamspring, so they're going to take their vengeance elsewhere.*

It would work, too. They outnumbered us. If we split up, we lost our position. If the battle spread everywhere, they could circle around and fire on Dreamspring while we were out trying to protect the other cities. There weren't enough of us. The damage would be immeasurable.

The Superiority didn't care who they hurt, as long as they got what they wanted. We'd escaped them too many times. Now they were going to teach us a lesson.

And the kitsen were going to pay the price.

# Nineteen

Arturo had our flights concentrated over Dreamspring, focusing on the ships that remained here. But it wouldn't help the kitsen on the surrounding islands. Some of the kitsen cytonics had hyperjumped their ships after the enemy—I saw one with mindblades trying to take down a ship, another using what felt like concussion bolts to stun a flight of enemy starfighters. They were fighting valiantly, but there were so many of the enemy, and maybe more yet to arrive.

We weren't going to be able to save everyone.

I looked up at the sky, at the relatively fewer number of ships. This wasn't a good thing. The Superiority would destroy the outer islands and then return for Dreamspring when they were done. I couldn't stop it.

The words of Juno's mantra came into my mind again, although the kitsen was silent beside me.

*In order to achieve control, you must first accept that you have none.*

I wanted control though. I wanted to put a stop to everything terrible that was happening, to save my people, to rescue Spensa, to pull her out of the nowhere and have her with me again safe. I wanted to go back and save my parents. They'd died because they'd made a desperate gambit in hopes that they could control our fate, make a better world for me, for all of us.

They failed. They couldn't control it. And neither could I.

I closed my eyes. In my mind, the Superiority ship exploded over and over.

*Do better than we did.*

We weren't though, were we? We were trying, but failing all the same.

"Boom," Boomslug said.

"Boom," I answered him.

A wave of helplessness washed over me. I couldn't stop what was coming. It would be like trying to stop a wave in the ocean. I couldn't stop



it, but I could let it wash over me and I could remain standing after it passed.

My radio flashed. Arturo's private channel. "Amphi?" I said.

"Jerkface. What...what are we going to do?"

We needed more help, but at this point I wasn't sure what else we *could* do. Against any other enemy it made sense for us to withdraw, to hope that they would have mercy on the kitsen. But I was never going to count on the Superiority's mercy.

"Protect the city," I said. "Send Quirk and Nedder to Detritus for more transport ships. Ask Angel if she can bring in any UrDail transport ships to evacuate other cities. We need to get as many people as we can off this planet before the Superiority musters up another one of those planetary weapons."

"Copy," Arturo said. He sounded as hollow as I felt. We both knew what we were about to watch. It would be the worst atrocity either of us had ever seen.

The general channel flashed. "Jerkface?" FM said. "The kitsen are boarding the transport ship. Should we send them out?"

"Is the ship full?" I asked.

"It will be soon. But...we can see the closest island, off to the dawnward side." She'd picked up that term from Alanik, and it was helpful, I had to give the UrDail that. "The ships are firing on the island. Shouldn't we... *help* them?"

There was pain in her voice, not unlike Kauri's. FM had a gift for that—feeling what other people were feeling.

Today it might as well be a curse, but at least I'd been able to give her the job of saving the people we could.

"Take the ship out," I said. "I'm going to check on Rig. We'll try to save them, but...I don't..."

"It's okay," FM said. "I know you're doing your best."

That was what I was afraid of. That this was my best.

And it was never, ever good enough.

"Juno," I said, "I'm going to take you to safety."

Juno looked down at his platform, at the piles of books stacked at his feet. “I should have brought more,” he said. “The books are digitized—the knowledge will not be lost, but these are the originals. It is a tragedy to lose them, but that’s even more true of my kinsmen.”

My throat closed up. All their knowledge. We needed that, and the Superiority would do their best to destroy it.

Stars.

In my mind, I reached for Detritus, searching for Rig. I felt his adrenaline before I’d even found him. He and his team were worn out trying to get the platform up and running, but they were still there doing the best they could.

*Report?* I asked him.

*We’ve got lots of slugs in lots of boxes,* Rig said. *And we think these rooms are connected to several platforms. That’s the only reason we can see that you’d need so many. But Jorgen, we don’t even know what some of these systems do.*

Alanik’s words to me on ReDawn echoed in my mind: *Focus on what you have.* If we could get even a few of those platforms here, we might be able to protect more cities while we evacuated them. There were hundreds upon hundreds of kitsen cities. The death toll would still be horrible. But... it would be something.

*I’m coming,* I said. *Whatever you’ve got, we need to try it now.*

*Okay,* Rig said.

I looked up at the sky. I could see what FM was talking about now—the flashes of light over the water, the Superiority firing on that island. FM should be pulling the transport ship out, but that was one tiny group of kitsen among so many.

It was going to take a miracle to get us out of this. Spensa taught me never to count a miracle out, and I hoped that held true even if she wasn’t here to work one for us this time.

“What are you going to do?” Juno asked. He stood with a book open, resting it on his forearm. In his paw, he held a small stick poised over the page.

*A pen,* I realized.

“What are *you* doing?” I asked.

“I’m making a record,” Juno said. “An original account of the actions of a shadow-walker.”

“No one’s going to want to read about anything I’ve done,” I said. I immediately realized it wasn’t true. He might be chronicling the end of civilization on Evershore. That depended not on me, but on how far the Superiority wanted to take their vengeance.

“I have waited all my life to witness the deeds of a shadow-walker,” Juno said. “And if this day is the last for my home, it will be my honor to record that it was not because your people left us to suffer alone.”

Scud. Wouldn’t we, though? We could evacuate *some* kitsen, but if we couldn’t turn the battle in our favor I was going to have to pull my people out. I couldn’t let them all die for nothing.

*Do better than we did*, my mother said.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t know if I could, but I was going to keep trying until I knew the answer. I rested my hand on Juno’s platform.

“Snuggles,” I said, “take us to Drape.”

We appeared in the room with the boxes and a lot fewer roaming slugs, most of which had been corralled into corners by the engineers.

Rig spun around from one of the control panels on the walls. “Jorgen,” he said.

“FM is fine,” I said. “She’s working on the evacuation effort. But the Superiority is fanning out over the planet, bombing civilians.” I didn’t know how they justified this to themselves. I didn’t know how they justified anything, but we had to put a stop to it. “We need to get these platforms over there. As many as we can move, as quickly as we can.”

The hum of all the slugs around us was overwhelming, and it was difficult for me to pick them out one from another. I tried to focus on the hyperdrive slugs, but I couldn’t because there were so many. I didn’t want to give a blanket instruction to all of them, since we didn’t know what many of them could do.

“Where’s Fine?” I asked.

“Hypercomm box, I hope,” Rig said. He moved down the row of boxes. “Over here.”

I found Fine before he did—one of the few signatures I knew in this cacophony. *Fine*, I said. *Can you tell them to take these platforms to Evershore?* I showed him an image of the slugs he knew—Naga, Happy, Chubs, Whiskers—all flying around the planet, and then some of the platforms appearing in a ring beneath the clouds, where they could fire on enemy ships.

*Go?* Fine said to me.

*Go*, I responded.

He hesitated for a moment—conversing, I thought, with the other slugs. And then I felt us slip into the nowhere, the surface of it rippling around us like rings on a pond. We passed beneath the eyes—scud, this was working. We’d be able to support the flights, and at least reduce the damage the ships were able to do to the islands of Evershore.

As we reemerged, I looked out the control room window, expecting to see the stars above.

Instead I saw the planet itself, an enormous ball of water, punctuated by sand-colored islands. Scud. The platform was way too high up, and we were facing the opposite of the direction I’d expected. I could see the backside of several of the Superiority carrier ships. They might be in range of our hyperweapons, but—

One of the engineers swore. “Flightleader Weight,” she said, “you’re going to want to see this.”

She indicated the proximity monitors, which showed the planet of Detritus and all the platforms moving around us—the entire belt of them.

They were *still there*.

*Scud*. The control room had worked, but it hadn’t only moved some platforms. It had moved the whole damn *planet*.

*Go*, I heard Fine say through the nowhere.

And all around me, the nowhere began to ripple, tear, and explode.

## Twenty

Bits of the nowhere ripped apart, exploding outward toward nearby Superiority carrier ships. Scud, there were more of them. It was kind of gratifying, seeing how much force Winzik felt he had to bring in order to take us down.

But he hadn't done it yet. Hyperweapons I didn't know we had erupted from the surfaces of the platforms, ripping up enemy ships. Ships swarmed below us, mostly centered over the island of Dreamspring. They weren't much more than dots, but through the nowhere I could feel the minds of the pilots—UrDail, kitsen, and human alike—all fighting together.

We were pretty high up, maybe even out of the atmosphere, so many of the enemy ships were out of range. I didn't feel like we should move the whole planet on a whim, though scud, did we need to move it farther away? What were two planets this large going to do to each other?

*Jorgen*, Alanik said. *What did you—*

*We brought company*, I told her. *All of it.*

*Apparently*, she answered.

My view of the planet below began to shift, and I realized the platform was drifting *away* from Detritus.

"Rig," I said, "are we *moving*?"

"Oh, scud," Rig said. "Is *that* what that navigation system does?"

Rig called to the other engineers, and several of them joined him at the panel. "Here," he said. "These are navigation controls like the ones on Platform Prime, but because there are no engine systems I could never figure out what they're for. But now—I think these inputs here are for coordinates, and then the system tells the hyperslugs where to go."

"Jerkface!" Kauri said over the radio. "I don't know what's going on up there, but our tidal authority would like you to know that your planet is going to pull on our oceans, gathering all the water on that side, causing an

*even worse* wave to engulf our islands. Wait—oh, they say it will do that *if* one of our planets doesn't rip the other one apart first."

"They're right," Rig said. "But it should have happened already." He scanned the monitors, looking for something. "I don't know why it hasn't, but my best guess is that the planet itself has some kind of gravitational capacitor—almost as if it was intended to be a traveling space station, so it has systems to counteract the gravitational forces for the surrounding bodies —"

"The *planet*," I said, "has *GravCaps*?"

"Yeah," Rig said, shaking his head. "Apparently it does."

"Negative, Kauri," I said over the radio. "Detritus has systems to prevent damage to Evershore."

"If so, they aren't working perfectly," Kauri said. "The tidal authority is seeing a rise in the water, though not nearly as bad as they'd expect."

"We're too close," Rig said. "GravCaps have limits, and running them at this strength has to be depleting their power source quickly. We need to move the planet farther off."

"Let's do it," I said. "Before that though, can you send the platforms out to the kitsen islands to defend them?"

"I need to find the coordinates," Rig said, tapping at his console, using the platform sensors to pinpoint the coordinates of the various islands.

"Kauri," I said. "Does your tidal authority know how far out Detritus needs to be to keep you safe?"

"They're working up some coordinates now," Kauri said.

"Okay," Rig said. "Here goes."

The platforms around us began to move, this one jumping to that island, that one to another, the hyperweapons firing on the Superiority ships caught in the air above the islands. We hadn't sent our forces out that far, so they wouldn't be caught in the blasts.

"We can't move all of them," I said. "We don't want to leave Detritus exposed. But let's unload as many as we can and then I'm going to instruct the slugs to move the planet again."

“This is Commander Ulan,” a voice said over the platform radio. “What the *scud* is going on up there?”

Oh stars. I couldn’t explain this, not now. “Defense protocol to protect the kitsen planet, sir,” I said. “I’ll give you a full briefing when the sequence is complete.”

“You’re calling this a *protocol*?” Ulan said.

I was stretching the definition of the word, that was for sure.

Rig reached over and turned down the volume on the radio. “Gerrig, help me enter these,” he said, and one of the other engineers stepped up beside him, assisting Rig in getting more coordinates into the system.

“Jerkface,” Kauri said. “The tidal authority says the water levels are still rising. Even if you move the planet, this is going to cause a tidal wave to hit Dreamspring. They’ve put out a warning to the city for everyone to get to high ground. The other nearby islands are doing the same.”

Moving everyone to high ground would make them easy targets for the Superiority, but if they were to drown anyway, what choice did they have? “I’ll send my people on the ground to help,” I said to Kauri, and then I switched to the medtechs’ channel. “Cuna, Zing,” I said. “There’s a tidal wave coming. Go into the city and help the kitsen get to high ground.”

“Copy, Jerkface,” Zing said.

I turned to Juno. “Will the cliffs be high enough to protect the library?”

“It has stood for centuries,” Juno said, “and we have faced tsunamis before.”

This one might be bigger. It depended on forces I didn’t fully understand. “Kel and Winnow,” I said over the radio, “Keep an eye on the water. If it looks like you’ll be overwhelmed, we’ll get you all out with a hyperdrive.”

“Copy,” Zing said again.

“I’m working on it,” I said. “Make sure your people are still headed for high ground.” I turned to Rig. “We need to move fast so that wave doesn’t get worse.”

“We’ve got platforms moving toward the islands that are under attack. Shield still operational. Ready when you are.”

I reached out to Fine, expressing our need for the slugs' help again, showing him an image of the planets tearing each other apart and an approximation of how far out I'd like them to move Detritus.

*Go*, Fine said.

*Go*, I agreed.

And in a blink we passed beneath the distracted eyes and stared out at Evershore, which was much smaller than it had been. Beside me Rig swore.

"Kauri," I said, "is that far enough?"

"They're watching the tidal levels," Kauri said. "They say they would like advance notice before your planet decides to visit again."

"Tell them we'll call first next time," I said. "And let me know if we need to move again. We can keep trying until we get it right."

*Jorgen*, Alanik said, *we could use some help down here*.

I expanded my senses outward, taking in the whole of the battlefield. Our people were fighting, but they were scared. The appearance of Detritus and the scattering platforms both encouraged and confused them. Arturo was doing a good job with our people, but a lot of the UrDail and kitsen couldn't understand him, and they lacked our organization and discipline. They were struggling.

I felt the kitsen cytonics wielding mindblades, hyperjumping their ships into better positions. I felt their joy at being reunited with their kinsmen and their terror that this day could be the last for their home. Down on the planet, I could feel the kitsen civilians huddling, frightened. And one mind listening carefully, with rapt attention and a fair amount of confusion.

Was that—

*Cobb*? I asked.

*Son*, he said, *I don't know what you've done up there, but for the North Star's sake don't stop now*.

I closed my eyes. There were people all around, fighting and dying because of me. I'd worked so hard to find Cobb, but now I realized I was *afraid* to find him, afraid of what he'd think of what we'd done.

All this, all the resources we'd expended, moving the scudding *planet*, that was on me—



*You WHAT?* Cobb said.

Oh. He could hear me. Scud.

*Sir, we—*

*Never mind,* Cobb said. *Focus. You've got a battle to win.*

I felt like I should stop and give a full report, find out what my commander's orders were. But I was pretty sure he'd *given* me an order, so...

Over by the control panel, Rig was fiddling with a radio, finding the flight's channel. We knew he'd found it when Arturo swore loudly. "Is that *Detritus* up there?"

"Yes, it is," Rig said. "If we couldn't bring you home, we thought we'd bring home to you."

"Saints and stars," Sadie said.

I waited for Nedd's wisecrack, but it didn't come and my heart dropped.

"Amphi," I said, "why don't I hear Nedder?"

"Because he's speechless for once," Sadie said.

"Like the Saint says," Kimmalyln said, "if you don't have anything to say, you might scare your flightleader into thinking you're dead."

"I'm here," Nedd said. "Just...wow."

"Orders, Jerkface?" Arturo said.

"The enemy ships are scattering away from the platforms," I said. The platforms were taking care of the area far above Dreamspring now, but even with their mobility they weren't versatile enough to do all the work. "All flights, intercept those fighters and chase as many as you can in the direction of the platforms. We have the advantage now. Let's use it."

Arturo started giving orders, but I could already see what the problem was going to be. We had three different species of pilots in the air, and only some of them had translators in their ships. Defending a city was a more contained effort. Trying to catch and herd the enemy ships was going to take an enormous coordinated effort. We needed precision, but we had different training, and some of the kitsen ships probably had no training at all in working with a group this large. Communicating with them all was going to be impossible.

Unless.

Scud, I had an idea. I reached for Fine's box and opened it, pulling him out into my arms.

*Thank you for your help*, I said. *Mind lending me some more?*

"Fine!" Snuggles said.

"Fine!" Fine said.

"Fine," I said. And I focused on the battle again, on the many minds now scattering out over the planet. I felt Fine following me, his mind scanning over all the fighter pilots, a few of them winking out of existence, others blind with terror about what would become of them. Some determined. Fighting. Focused mostly on staying alive.

I could see the shape of the battle. I could see the patterns in the chaos, the places where we needed to push forward and those where we needed to pull back to manipulate the enemy. To stop their destruction and get them where we wanted them.

"Ready?" I said to Fine.

"Ready," Fine said.

And I pushed outward toward their minds, sending them all the vision, helping them see what I could see. Not a mass of individual fighters, but a military so brave and strong and *powerful* that even the almighty Superiority was afraid of it.

This was it, I realized. The thing the Superiority feared the most. The power of all of us working together.

I could feel other commslugs joining us, amplifying the signal to my allies below. I could sense their minds responding. I couldn't pick out individual voices, only this *feeling*. We were in this together, and in that we had hope.

I focused on the different fronts, directing our flights, pushing this one here, that one there. Pulling back some of our forces and urging others to retreat to the city, to cover the hospital area and the homes of the civilians. They all understood me, because in our minds there were no languages, no barriers. Around me Rig's team continued to direct the platforms into place. Piece by piece the platforms were extending their shield across Evershore,

trapping the enemy inside where my fighters hunted them mercilessly, driving them up into the fire of the platforms.

So many pieces, but I could see the larger pattern and I did my best to express it. Our fighters began to fly better, more precisely, taking more and more control of the skies—

And then I heard a whisper from the nowhere. One word, the sweetest of all.

*Retreat.*

The Superiority ships began to race for the edges of the shield, the fighters pouring into their remaining carrier ships, which blinked out of existence. Some of the fighters turned and ran without a ship to go back to, flying with blind terror, and my people picked them off one by one.

In my mind, one feeling resonated above all others.

Relief.

They were leaving.

We'd won.

It was only one battle, one raincloud from the oncoming storm. But we were going to hold out. We were going to keep fighting.

From now on, we'd do it together.

## Twenty-One

When the battle was over, I hyperjumped with Juno down to the cliff above Dreamspring. The tidal wave had hit the lower city while I'd been gone, and there was considerable flooding, though the upper city remained intact and the water hadn't reached the cliffs by the library. A few of the buildings had taken damage from falling ships or destructor fire, and bits of wreckage were scattered over the fins and ridges of the city.

"I'm sorry this happened," I said to Juno.

"So am I," Juno said. "But my people leave today richer, despite the setbacks."

"You have your cytonics back," I said.

"It is more than that," Juno said. "We are no longer isolated."

There was still so much to figure out, so much work to do. The ever-present political squabbling would continue on.

But Juno was right. We weren't alone anymore. We were still fighting for our lives, but at least now we could fight side by side.

I squinted up at Detritus, which hung in the sky like a second moon, a bright sphere of metal and glinting shield. Stars, I didn't know how long we should leave it here, but I was going to let Cobb make that call. And all the calls from here on out, just as soon as I explained everything to him.

A transport ship hyperjumped into the middle of the road below the cliff face, probably carried by one of the taynix from Platform Prime. I squinted, watching as the ship's cabin lights illuminated a man in a vice admiral's uniform.

Stoff climbed out of the ship and moved toward the library. The medtechs were just pulling Cobb and Gran-Gran down the stairs, still on their stretchers. They left Cobb at the top and carried Gran-Gran, who protested loudly all the way down to the transport ship.

“I have to go talk to my superiors,” I said to Juno. “It’s better if you don’t come with me this time.”

“That’s all right, shadow-walker,” Juno said, lifting his book. “I have a great many things to record.”

“Snuggles,” I said, and I urged her to hyperjump us to the roadway beside the ship. When we arrived, I could hear Gran-Gran yelling at the medtechs.

“I can walk!” she said. “I may be old and blind, but I’m not infirm!”

I stepped aside as the medtechs persisted in carrying her to the transport ship. “It’s okay, Gran-Gran,” I said. “No one thinks you’re incapable.”

“They’d better not,” Gran-Gran said. “Or I’ll show them.”

I was sure she would.

Stoff had already made it to Cobb’s side. FM came up next to me—I saw her ship parked up the road now, by Sadie’s.

“Sir,” Stoff said. “We are so thrilled you’re back. We’ve made some great strides in securing alliances with the UrDail and the kitsen.”

“That’s good,” Cobb said. He looked over to me, like he was waiting for me to say something. His face was still bruised, his left eye partially swollen shut.

“It’s true, sir,” I said. “We have made progress.” I knew Stoff was going to take credit for everything now that it had panned out, and I didn’t want to start a war with him. I was too tired from the one we’d just fought. We’d saved lives and made alliances. That was what mattered, not the petty politics of who ordered what.

I glanced at FM, thinking she’d be glad I wasn’t picking this battle.

“Stoff had nothing to do with it,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Stoff said.

Cobb looked over at her.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” she asked.

“I think you’ve already started doing that,” Cobb said, his voice hoarse. “So go on.”

“Stoff had nothing to do with the alliance with the kitsen,” FM said. “He refused to make the call to send the flights to help them. He dumped all the

responsibility onto Jorgen so that if it was the wrong choice, Jorgen would take the fall for it.”

Stoff’s mouth fell open.

“Is that true, son?” Cobb asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Though in Stoff’s defense, I did come in swinging.”

FM gave me a sharp look, like she didn’t understand why I was speaking in Stoff’s defense, but it was the truth.

“I told him we were already authorized by you to make alliances,” I continued, “and we weren’t going to hear anything more from the assembly about talking to the Superiority.” I was pretty sure I’d implied we weren’t going to hear anything more from the assembly *ever*, but that was obviously not a long-term solution.

“Before we knew of your whereabouts,” Stoff said, “we felt it was best to follow your last orders.”

“Who is we?” Cobb asked. “Last I checked, in the absence of the admiral the vice admiral’s job isn’t done by committee.”

Stoff stammered.

“If he hadn’t listened to me,” I said, “we might never have found you and Mrs. Nightshade. I don’t know how long your bodies would have lasted with your spirits in the portal, but I can’t imagine it would have been long.”

Cobb gave me a look that said I wasn’t helping myself, but it was true. Stoff was a coward, but he’d stayed out of my way when it mattered.

“The point is,” FM said, “Jorgen is the one who found Kauri’s transmission, which led us to you on Evershore. He made the call to travel here to find you, and to try to follow your last orders to us and make alliances for Detritus. And when everything went wrong, Jorgen is the one who made the call to pull in more flights, to put Rig and his team on moving the platforms, and to ultimately make the discovery together with them that we could move the planet.”

Cobb looked at me. I couldn’t deny anything she’d said. Those were the facts. “That’s true, sir. Though she did leave out the part where I manifested mindblades in a meeting full of alien politicians. So it wasn’t all good.”

“Yes, well,” Cobb said, “you seem to have overcome that misstep all right.”

“Sir,” Stoff said. “I’m sure you understand that I was only trying to do what was best for the people of Detritus. Clearly you had put your trust in Flightleader Weight, and so I—”

“That’s enough,” Cobb said. “Stoff, take a walk.”

Stoff’s jaw dropped again. “Sir?” he said.

“*Take a walk*,” Cobb repeated.

Stoff blinked at him, and then he turned around and left.

“It really was a good thing he listened to me,” I said. “If he hadn’t let me make the decisions, we could have lost the whole kitsen planet.”

“That may be,” Cobb said. “But a commander who shuffles off the hard choices is no commander at all.” He looked at me like he was considering something. He bent over for a moment, coughing, and FM and I looked at each other in alarm.

I had no idea what being half-stuck behind that portal had done to Cobb’s body, but he seemed to be weathering it poorly.

“Sir?” I said.

“FM, would you excuse us?” Cobb said when he could speak again.

My heart dropped. Here it was. He was going to chew me out for taking control. The decisions I’d made were far above my pay grade. I shouldn’t have done the things I did, even though they’d saved lives.

Stoff would have painted me as a renegade if things had gone poorly, but that wouldn’t have taken a very broad brush.

FM gave me one worried look, and then she nodded and turned to leave. Cobb sat up in bed, glancing with irritation at the medical devices still strapped to his arm.

“I’m sorry I acted rashly, sir,” I said. “I can brief you on everything, get you up to speed.”

“I heard quite a bit over the radio there at the end,” Cobb said, his voice still strained. He looked up at me like he was struggling to focus. “And that thing you did, speaking directly to everyone’s minds. That’s cytonic, isn’t

it? You haven't manifested some other ungodly power I need to know about?"

"No sir," I said. "It's cytonic. How...how long were you listening over the radio? I told them to call in as soon as you were awake—"

"And I told them to keep their mouths shut and let you work," Cobb said. "It was clear you had things well in hand."

That...seemed like an overstatement.

"We may not have done everything exactly by the book," I said, "but we've made progress on the alliance, and we have a lot more knowledge of how our own technology functions. I think you're going to be really pleased about what we have to work with. There were some rough patches, sir, but we pulled through them. And now that you're back—"

"You've taken on an incredible amount of responsibility," Cobb continued.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "I was doing the best I could with the resources I had. And I think my judgment was a little impaired by what happened to my parents—"

"I'm sorry about what happened to them," Cobb said. "The med team filled me in. They were lost in the explosion?"

"Yes," I said.

Cobb shook his head. "We disagreed, but they didn't deserve for it to end like that."

My eyes started to burn, but I blinked it away.

"None of that changes the incredible work you've done here," Cobb said. "If this is what you do when your judgment is 'impaired,' I'd like to see what you do when you're thinking clearly."

"I was simply trying to do what I thought you would do if you were here," I said.

Cobb gave me a look, and I stuttered.

"I may not have predicted that perfectly," I added.

"In this case, that only seems like a good thing." He looked up at the clouds and shook his head again. "You have things so well in hand that I'm going to promote you to vice admiral."



Stars. *Vice admiral*? That was skipping a lot of ranks. Though I did like the idea of getting to advise Cobb directly, what with everything we'd done and learned since he was replaced by that Superiority plant.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"As soon as that's taken care of," Cobb said, coughing again, "I think it's clear that I'm in no condition to lead, especially when we're now hopping our entire *planet* around the galaxy." He eased himself back on his stretcher, staring up at the sky. "So I'm going to need to relieve myself from duty, until such a time that I'm fit for command."

I blinked at him, trying to make those words mean something other than what I thought they meant. "Which of the vice admirals do you intend to give operational command to, sir?"

"I know subtlety isn't your strong point," Cobb said, "but if you can figure out how to move an entire planet, I think you can answer that question yourself."

Saints and stars. "You can't be serious. You have so much more experience—"

"With all of *this*?" He waved his arm, taking in the kitsen city, the ships above us, Detritus shining in the sky like it had always been there. He winced, holding his side, and then let his arm fall again. "No, Admiral, I would say you and your flight are the only ones with *any* experience dealing with all of this. Both our military and a coalition of alien races are ready to follow you into battle against a foe so powerful they probably shouldn't have any hope of survival, much less victory. But they *do*. They're chattering about it over the radio, all of us resisting together."

"I didn't mean to take control," I said. "I was only trying to hold out until you returned. I never wanted—"

One corner of Cobb's mouth turned up. "No," he said. "The good ones never do."

I stared at him. "You're serious."

"I am. I don't intend to abandon you. There's a whole lot of paperwork surrounding the position, and it'll be good for you to have someone to help keep that out of your way. But clearly you're best suited to be in strategic

command. The Saint knows you're better suited to it than I am." Cobb raised an eyebrow at me, and his mustache twitched. "Unless you mean to turn down the promotion."

He watched me carefully, waiting for my answer.

I looked up at the sky, at the gleaming moon of Evershore and Detritus hanging up there with it. I'd brought us this far on the hope that Cobb would relieve me of the responsibility to pull us through this—if not unscathed, then at least *alive*. I'd thought there was an end, a point at which I could unload everything that rested on my shoulders.

If I said yes, that might never end. But if I refused, I'd only be shuffling it off to someone else. There was no one besides Cobb that I'd trust to lead us as we faced what was coming. I'd pushed us this far so we could have the benefit of his judgment again.

And if this was what he thought was best, then so be it. "No, sir," I said. "I'll accept it."

"Good." Cobb put a hand on my arm. "I wish your parents could see what you've accomplished. They would be so proud of you."

Something inside me cracked.

In my time in the Defiant Defense Force, I'd felt lost and inadequate. I'd felt undermined and humiliated in front of both my flightmates and my superiors. I'd made calls no human being should ever have to make, had been both right and wrong about them, and had to live with both. I'd stayed in control through it all, because that was what I had been raised to do.

But at that moment, the veneer of my composure shattered like a damaged canopy. In front of my superior officer—*scud*, was he still my superior?—I started to cry.

"You're going to be all right, son," Cobb said, squeezing my arm. "If you need my help, you can now contact me no matter where I am. Which is a little disturbing, by the way. If you're going to make a habit of it, find some way to give me warning. It's going to take some getting used to."

"I'll try, sir," I said.

Cobb shook his head at me. "You can do what you want with Stoff," he said. "It's your decision."

“I don’t think he should be in command anymore,” I said. “But I don’t want to punish him either. He really could have made things a lot more difficult and gotten a lot more people killed.”

“That seems like a good decision,” Cobb said. “Not your first.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now if you don’t mind,” Cobb said, “I’m going to close my eyes for a minute.”

“Of course, sir,” I said.

“And Jorgen?”

“Yes, sir?”

Cobb sighed. “You’re going to have to stop calling me sir.”

# Epilogue

I left Cobb with the medtechs and stumbled up the road toward the city. I found Cuna standing outside the senate building. It appeared to be filled with kitsen, all packed in together. Goro hovered by Cuna's shoulder, still in his ceremonial armor.

"How did the evacuation go?" I asked.

"Very well," Cuna said. "We opened the buildings in the upper city so that the kitsen in the lower areas had somewhere to take shelter. I believe most of them made it out."

"Thank you for your help," I said.

"I'm glad I could be of service," Cuna said. "And that we could save the people here." They looked back into the senate chamber, packed with so many kitsen I could hardly tell one from another.

Cuna cared about these people, I realized. They spoke like they thought themselves superior, but they were trying to save lives. I could work with that.

"I'm sorry about the flooding," I said to Goro.

Goro looked out at the city somberly, and I expected him to announce that we were enemies once again, for all the destruction we'd brought in our wake. "Tell me, human," he said. "Now that you have fought on our shores and won, do you consider us your conquest?"

"No," I said. "But I'm hoping we can call you our allies."

Goro narrowed his eyes at me. "Cuna says you've brought back our shadow-walkers, who we thought lost forever. You command the tides themselves, moving celestial bodies in the firmament. But you don't mean to rule us?"

"If I commanded the tides," I said, pointing toward the lower city, "I wouldn't have told them to do *that*. We humans have enough trouble ruling

over ourselves. We only want an alliance, I swear to you. No one is going to invade.”

Goro snorted. “Fair enough, human. It’s not my decision, but I will speak for you if you need my support.”

“Thank you,” I said. Though at this moment, what I needed most was to get away. I excused myself and strode down the road, past the crowds of kitsen who were leaving the buildings of the upper city to survey the damage.

I found FM at the end of the road, where the water now flooded the lower levels of the city. Ships hovered over it, pilots lifting their canopies, looking up at the platforms surrounding the planet. Some of the platforms disappeared and reappeared again in different positions—Rig was obviously still working out their optimal spacing for generating the shield.

Stars, the things we’d accomplished, and yet there was still so much work to do. We had to seize on this—the way we’d worked together, the potential we had as a group. Someone was going to have to keep that momentum going...and scud, that was *me*.

*Do better than we did.*

I was...*excited* to get started.

“How did it go?” FM asked.

“Cobb made me vice admiral,” I said. “And then he stepped down and put me officially in charge.”

Her mouth fell open. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Jorgen,” she said, “that’s wonderful.”

“Is it?”

“Yes! I mean—” She shook her head. “You’ll be so great at it.”

FM knew my weaknesses as a leader as well as anyone, so her confidence meant something.

“Scud,” she said, “that means you won’t be our flightleader anymore.” She sounded sad, which was also significant.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s right.”

I looked up at the sky. The clouds had thinned, and stars peeked through the blackness, so clear it felt like we were out in space.

“You could take over the flight, you know,” I said. “You’d be good at it.”

“I don’t want it,” FM said. “I’ve never wanted to be in charge.”

“I know,” I said. “I think I’m going to leave it to Arturo.”

“You should. He’ll do a good job.”

“He will.” FM would too, but I understood why she didn’t want it. Besides, I needed her somewhere else. “How would you feel about leaving the flight?”

FM looked at me. “What?”

“You were right,” I said. “We don’t have diplomats, and we need them. The assembly is a mess, but we do need to work with them. The DDF needs a diplomatic program to work with our *own* scudding people in addition to our allies. We’ve got to get everyone on the same page, and we can’t do it by ordering them there. I’m going to need someone in charge who cares about more than the chain of command.”

“*You* care about more than that,” FM said.

“I do,” I said. “And that’s why I want to put you in charge of our diplomatic program. We need your empathy. *I* need you to help me figure out how to handle all of this—the politics, and the foreign relationships. You’re so good at seeing through the rules and the orders and the scudding red tape and getting right at what needs to be done for the people involved. I know you don’t want to be in command. But there’s nobody better to be in charge of *this*.”

I took a deep breath. I could order her to do it. I had the authority now, but I didn’t want to do that to FM. She was my friend. She’d already gone above and beyond for our people. She didn’t have to take this on if she didn’t want it. “It’s your choice though. I understand if you want to stay with the flight.”

FM stared up at the sky, the stars reflecting in her eyes. “I’ll do it.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “I hate the idea of the flight going out without me. I hate that I won’t be there to protect them.”

“You’d be protecting them in a different way,” I said.

“I know. And that’s why I’ll do it. I never wanted to fight, you know. I only wanted to do what was best for the people who don’t have a voice. The people the DDF ignores.”

I nodded. “And I don’t want to get so caught up in the military structure that I forget why we’re doing this. I need your help.”

FM nodded. “You’re going to regret having said that when I start disagreeing with you.”

I laughed. “Probably. But that’s what I need you for.”

“I’ll be sure to remind you of that often.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

FM continued to stare at the sky with a troubled expression.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I asked. “If you need to think about it—”

“I’m sure,” FM said. “I feel relieved, and I hate myself for it.”

“I don’t think you need to.”

She looked sideways at me. “Does that ever stop you?”

Um. “No. But if it makes you feel better, flying is probably a whole lot easier than getting people to communicate with each other.”

“Probably,” FM said. “And it’s not like our lives won’t still be in danger. But it’s not the same.”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t.” I’d already made calls that put my friends in danger. I was going to have to do it again and again and again. I wasn’t sure how to feel good about that.

Maybe I never would.

Maybe that was because I shouldn’t.

“I’m going to go tell Rig,” FM said.

I wondered if she was agreeing to leave the flight because of him, but I didn’t ask. I wouldn’t judge her for it if she did.

FM looked at me. “If you need to talk more—”

“We’ll do that later,” I said. “You can go.”

I did need to talk more, I realized. I couldn’t do this alone, so it was a good thing I didn’t have to. Right now though...

I wished I could talk to Spensa. I missed her so much I ached. I wanted to know what she thought of all this.

She would believe in me. I was sure of that much. She *always* believed in me, even when I drove her crazy. The same way I believed in her, even though I hated how far away she was, hated that I didn't know if she'd make it home.

I reached out, searching for her, and I found that presence again. Doomslug. She was worried about Spensa. I could feel it. So was I.

I'd done some impossible things tonight, things I couldn't explain. I usually thought of Spensa as the one who pulled off impossible tasks, but apparently she wasn't the only one.

I wasn't going to give up on her. I'd keep learning, I'd keep trying, and I'd find a way to help her if I could.

But if not, I would at least make sure she had a home to come back to.



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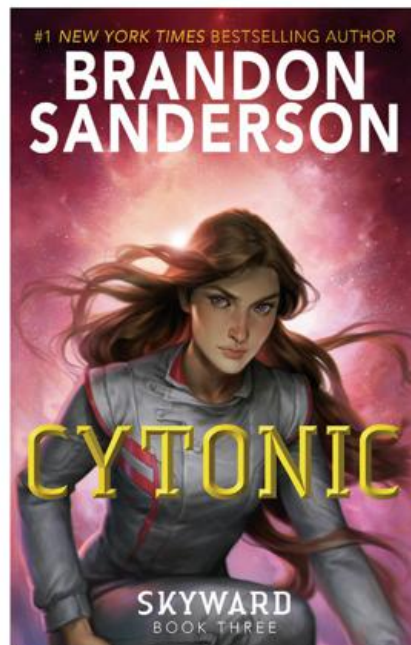
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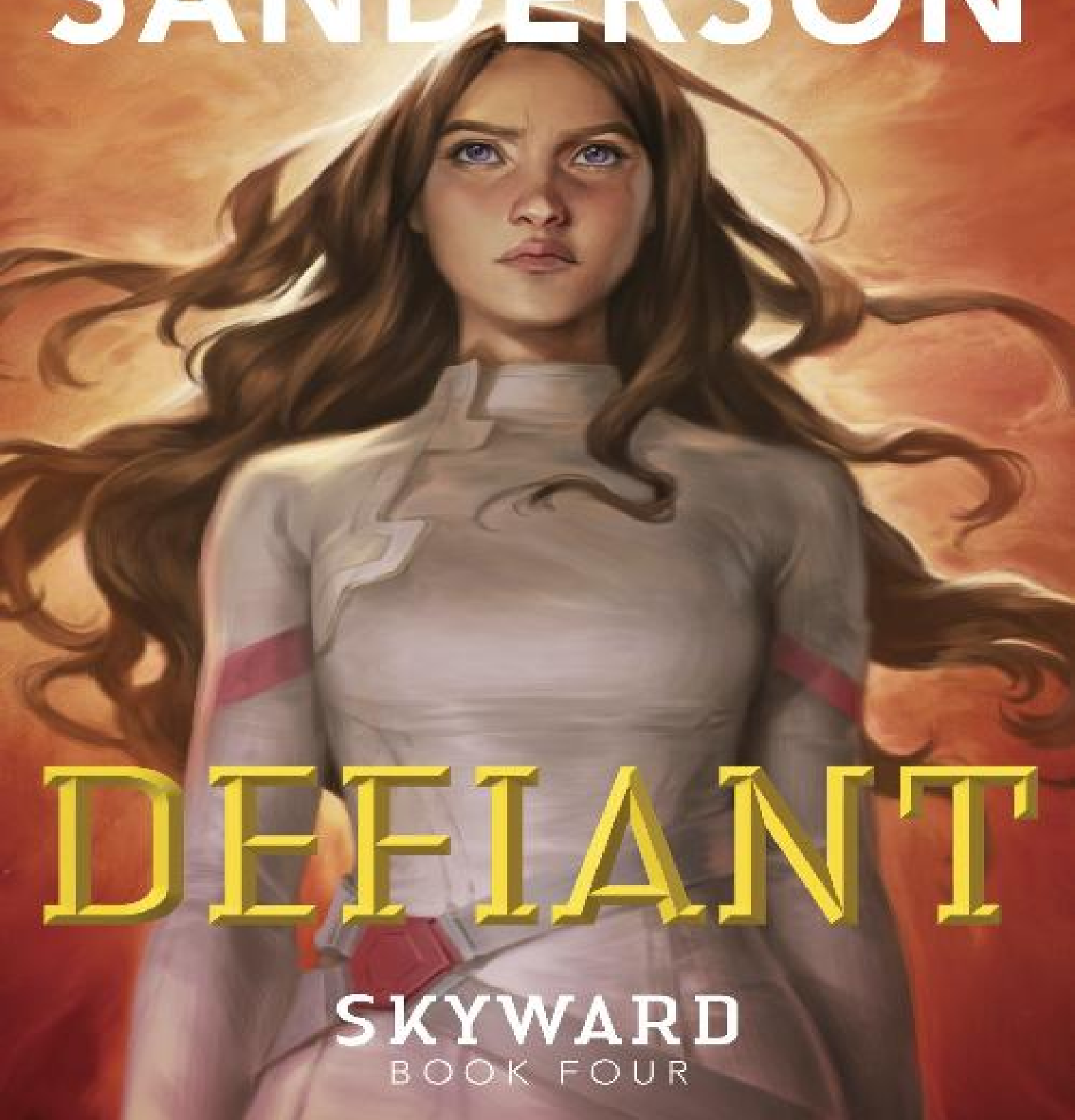
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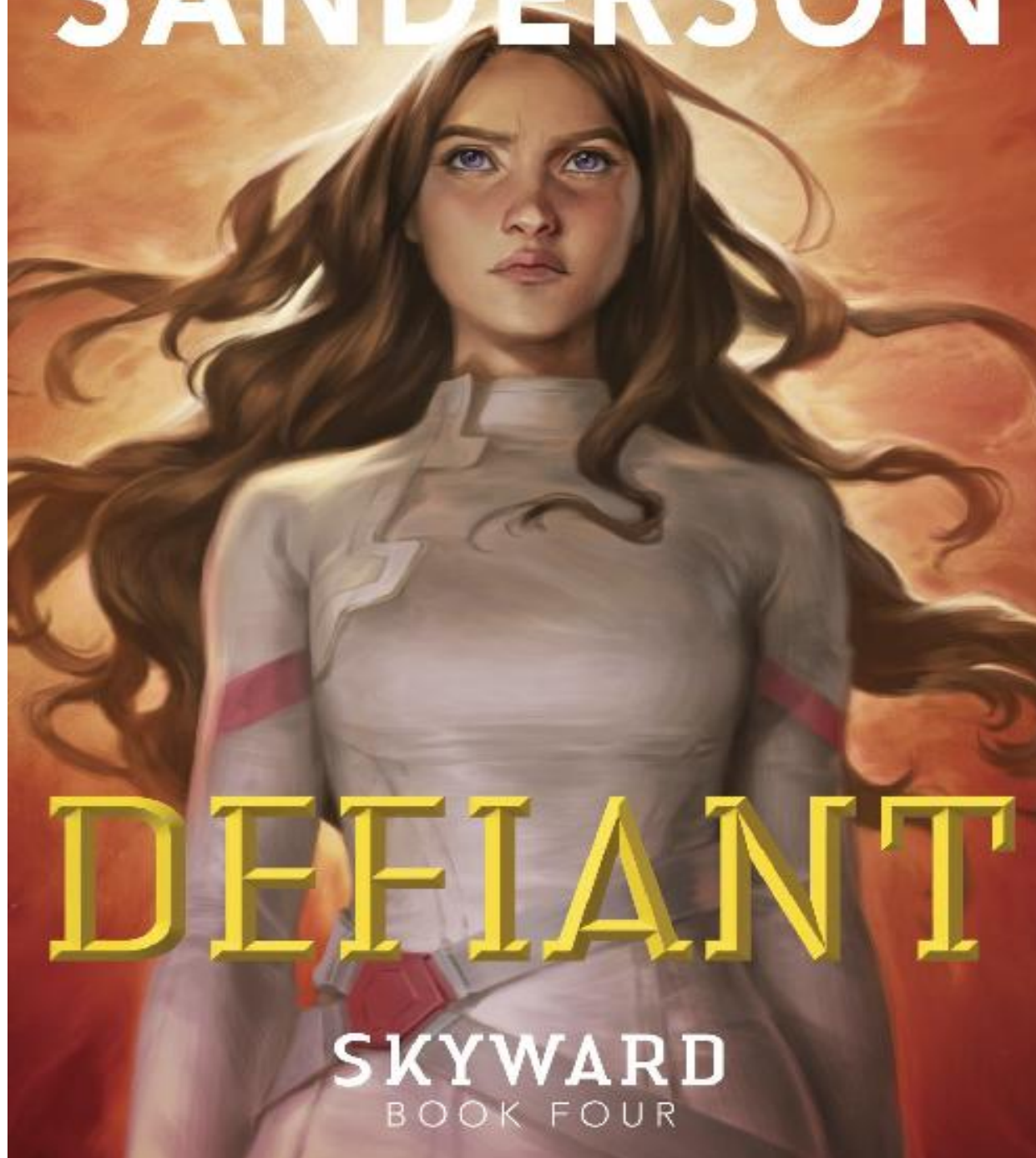


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# Contents

[Cover](#)

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[Title Page](#)

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[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

## [Part One](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

## [Part Two](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

## [Part Three](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[\*Appendix: Illustrations in Plain Text Format\*](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

For Kara,

Who carries my books to the world.

# PROLOGUE

I floated in a void of nothing.

And felt like I belonged there.

So strange. I was a creature of flesh and blood. I *knew* that. Yet my soul—part of it at least—felt more at home here. In a vast void of meaningless time. The nowhere.

I was a person of two worlds. Spensa, the girl from Detritus, a warrior. Chet, the delver, a being outside space and time. We had become one.

We'd become a weapon.

I still didn't know how that worked. But I had some connection to this place that I believed would let me attack the delvers. Delvers—the terrible, strange beings that had destroyed planets and threatened my reality. I could *hurt* them. I didn't know how yet, but the thing I'd become...it could *destroy* them.

They were frightened of me. So they hid.

*How can they hide?* I thought. *All time and space is one single point here.*

*They are looking inward,* Chet responded. Part of my soul, yes, but we were still two individuals. It had been just over a week since I'd returned from the nowhere, and I was still learning how all this worked. But I did feel much more like myself now than when I'd first arrived.

*I don't understand,* I sent to him.

*We have no bodies,* Chet explained. *So you can only see us—what you call the eyes—when we are looking. It is complicated...as light only*

*becomes visible when you interact with it, when it hits your eyes, you can only be aware of us when we are aware of you.*

Yeah. He might have been stapled to my soul—and I might have felt like I belonged in this void—but a ton of this still broke my brain to think about.

*How do we fight them?* I asked him.

*I don't know,* he replied. *We need to learn. For now, isn't it enough that they're afraid of us?*

It should have been. But something about that bothered me. An issue with their fear that I couldn't quite explain yet. So for the moment I hovered, considering. Worried, but unable to explain why. Alone. In a place that was populated by thousands upon thousands of my enemies.

*M-Bot?* I thought, questing out with my cytonic senses.

No response. I didn't know what had happened to him. Chet said he'd survived somehow, but despite searching each day since my return—coming here to the nowhere via cytonic mental projection—I'd not been able to find any sign of my friend. The ship I'd once flown, a delver in embryo.

I sighed and tried experimenting with my powers. Melding with the delver had changed me in two significant ways. First, in my vicinity the border between somewhere and nowhere seemed more...flimsy. Second, I had a connection to the delvers—and to others. I could enter minds more easily. I could feel emotions more easily.

Here in the nowhere, time was meaningless. Each person entering it, however, pulled a little bit of the *somewhere* in with them. Left an imprint, like a picture. On my journey, I'd been able to touch similar pictures left deliberately for me. Now I began to get glimpses of ones left *unintentionally*. Traces of what my friends had experienced while I'd been gone.

As I reached out, I found images. Impressions. Residual bits of emotion and experience left as my friends hyperjumped in and out of the nowhere. Bread crumbs that helped me experience what they'd been through while I was gone. They'd told me, of course, but now I *saw* it.

I saw their panic when I vanished to go to Starsight. I saw them befriend Alanik, the purple-skinned alien who had crashed on Detritus. With her, they'd eventually gone to rescue her world from the Superiority, bringing a small planet's worth of people to our cause.

I saw the National Assembly, my people's political leaders, try to make a deal with the enemy. And I saw a tragic betrayal as Winzik gleefully turned that summit into a trap—setting off an explosion that killed most of our leaders. I saw Gran-Gran and Cobb vanish into the nowhere, propelled by her talents, to protect them—and I saw them get trapped there.

Finally, I saw the kitsen. Small foxlike aliens who walked on two feet, and whose entire planet was in danger when the Superiority decided to attack. I saw interactions between them and my people, with Skyward Flight doing hard work to forge an alliance. Jorgen reluctantly taking up leadership not just of our flight, but of the entire military. Using his powers to rescue not only Gran-Gran and Cobb, but the kitsen cytonics, who had been trapped in an interdimensional prison for centuries.

These were mere glimpses—likely only possible because of my deep ties to my friends. When I tried to use the same abilities to spy on my enemies, I got nothing. But these images helped me fill in what had happened in my absence, and also left me feeling sorrowful. Because I hadn't been there to help. Because they'd all learned so much, accomplished so much, and I was left as an observer to their lives.

*What you were doing was important,* Chet said to me. I nodded, as I knew it was true, but still...

I left the nowhere, coming aware in my bunk back on Detritus. I still had a problem, one bigger than my own emotional baggage: I didn't know how these new powers would help me defeat the delvers. It was my job to protect my people from them. It was why I'd gone to the nowhere; I was supposed to become the weapon that could defeat them.

Despite all I'd learned, all I'd accomplished, I felt like I was still so very ignorant. I had no idea what I was doing.

Chet vibrated my soul in a way that was comforting. He was doing his best to help. I sighed, climbed out of my bunk, and prepared for the day. By

all accounts, it was going to be a doozy. Fortunately, for the time being all I had to do was stand in place and try to look imposing. I stumbled to the mirror, and what looked back was anything *but* imposing. Frizzy hair, down past my shoulders now. Bags under my eyes.

And something within those eyes, something haunted. Something dangerous. Something I didn't understand.

Myself, and what I'd become.

I shook my head. Heaved a long sigh.

Then took out my dress uniform.



# PART ONE

# 1

**F**ive hours later, I stood at parade rest on stage.

I'd survived innumerable starfighter battles. I'd escaped the destructive power of the lifebuster bomb by a fraction of a moment. I'd traveled the nowhere itself, teasing out the memories and wisdom of the ancients. I'd looked straight at the delvers—the terrible, eldritch monsters that lived outside of time and space—meeting their eyes and refusing to back down. I was Spensa Nightshade, warrior.

Which meant, I had come to learn, that I was an important political tool.

And so today, instead of being out fighting, I had to wear something far less comfortable than a good flight suit. My chest was laden with medals—I was pretty sure they'd invented a few new ones to give me, just to make me look more impressive. Despite that, today's ceremony wasn't about me. I was, like the medals themselves, an ornament. A way to lend credibility to what was happening before me.

Jorgen Weight being named Defiant Defense Force admiral of the fleet. And, since the National Assembly had been destroyed, we were under martial law—meaning that as the DDF admiral of the fleet, he was also provisional head of our government. Until something else could be arranged.

Even with my glimpses of what had happened in my absence, I felt like I was behind. Still struggling to catch up.

Jorgen leaned forward as one of our elders placed the appropriate epaulettes on his shoulders, conferring his new rank. Then he stood up tall. Looking at his strong, determined features, you'd never have known that

he'd broken down a few days ago, crying in my arms over the death of his parents. They had been Assembly members.

A part of my soul echoed with the cry of pain he'd made as the blast had killed them. What a fool's errand that had been. I couldn't believe the Assembly had really tried to make peace with the Superiority. They'd walked right into that trap. Still, I tried not to blame them. While I'd never gotten along with the Assembly members I'd met, for Jorgen's sake I mourned. It was a major blow to all of us, not just those who had lost family. It blared out an insult loud as the galaxy itself: we weren't even worth negotiating with.

Applause erupted in the long, broad hall where we'd gathered for the event. I stood to the side of the stage, along with Kimmalyne, FM, and several other distinguished DDF officers. My spot gave me a good view of the audience, which was strikingly varied. Despite what I'd seen, it was hard to believe that in my absence, my friends had accomplished so much. Two entire planets had joined with us in defiance.

Prominent among them were the kitsen, who stood on an array of floating platforms, with speakers to magnify their chirps of approval. In rescuing their long-lost cytonics, we now had a force of people with powers like my own—if more compact, in their fifteen-centimeter-tall furry frames.

Alanik's people, the UrDail, were also there—though in smaller numbers. They had violet skin and prominent bone-white facial protrusions. The ones I'd met this week treated me cordially, but I could sense the awkwardness there. Alanik herself was near the front of their group, and although she and my flight had become good friends, she avoided my gaze. Fair enough. I'd impersonated her, and had done quite a bit in her name. Though she said she understood why...well, I wouldn't have liked the idea of anyone running around impersonating *me*.

Jorgen stood before the crowd, accepting the applause. I could tell from that strained, too-responsible look in his eyes that he didn't think he deserved it. I was proud of him for accepting it anyway. He had never wanted this; he, like me, just wanted to fly. But I hadn't heard a complaint out of him since my return.

Someone had to step up and take the lead, and Jorgen was one of our most battle-hardened and experienced pilots. That itself was terrifying, considering his age, but it was the truth. We needed him.

Once the applause died down, FM barked an order, and those of us on the stage snapped to attention and saluted. Jorgen returned the salute, then walked to the podium to make his speech. That was the sign that the rest of us could break salute, step backstage, then make our way to our seats.

I ducked out first, wondering if maybe I could—

“Hey, Spin,” a voice said, and I turned to see Kimmalyn hurrying toward me. Kimmalyn wore her hair long, naturally forming tight curls that reached to her shoulders. She’d been forced to pin on nearly as many medals as me. “You all right?” she asked. “You look distracted.”

“Fine,” I said as others filed around us. Then I just stood there, silent.

Scud. I still didn’t know what to say to my friends. How did I even begin to explain what I’d been through? That I had a delver stapled to my soul? That I’d seen the origins of cytonics, then nearly lost myself in a place where time frayed like the edges of an old coat? That I’d almost decided to *stay* and abandon them?

“If you need—” Kimmalyn started.

“I’ve gotta hit the head,” I said, accidentally talking over her.

Her expression turned concerned again. Maybe a little hurt that I hadn’t opened up to her, as I once had.

I fled, but not to the head. I got “lost” on the way, and in under ten minutes I was in the cockpit of a Poco starfighter, boosting out into space to do a quick patrol of the region.

It was a selfish move. Someone might notice my empty seat, and it might start rumors. But scud...I’d been going to far, *far* too many meetings lately. One week since my return, and I’d barely had any time in a ship. Plus, I’d heard Jorgen’s speech six times already as he’d practiced.

So I flew, enjoying the sensation of the g-forces pushing me back in my seat. Enjoying the sight of Detritus’s many layers of platforms rotating above me, with the soft blue-grey stone ground extending before me. And

in a moment of exultation, I activated my cytonic abilities and hyperjumped toward outer space, just beyond the planet.

The moment I jumped, Chet stirred, his soul stuffed inside my body like a parachute packed in its ejection pod.

*I don't know what to make of my new powers*, I thought at him as—once again—we hung in the void and saw only blackness. *The other day, I hyperjumped something without touching it.*

*Yes*, he thought back. *You are part delver now. Distance and space are... not as relevant to you as they once were.*

Here, floating for a moment in the nowhere—and once again not seeing any delvers—I felt I understood a little better why I was dangerous to them. It had something to do with my deeper intrinsic connection to the nowhere and the delvers. One thing I'd learned in my travels was that they had hidden away parts of themselves, had intentionally forgotten their pain.

Now that I was part delver, I could see the truth. I could see what Chet had done to hide that same pain. I thought...I thought if I could figure it all out, *this* could be the secret to their destruction.

I took a moment to quest out for M-Bot again, but felt nothing, so I completed the hyperjump. I appeared back in the somewhere, in my ship, outside Detritus's shell. And in that moment I realized something. Why I'd been concerned earlier in the day when Chet had noted the delvers were afraid of me.

He stirred. *Yes*, he thought at me. *Why are you worried? It's good that they're frightened, yes?*

*Good*, I thought back, *and bad. Chet, they're desperate. And desperate people do unpredictable things.* I'd spent all this time learning to anticipate them—but now, who knew what they would do?

He settled back against my soul, like a person leaning back in a chair, and pondered on that. Because we were linked, he understood instantly what I meant. And soon I saw that he understood my worry as well.

Still, I tried to put those concerns out of my mind for the moment, so I could just enjoy the flight. Tried to ignore the weight upon my soul. The lingering sadness—though I tried to stamp it out—at having left the

nowhere, where I could have explored without responsibility, behind. The worry about M-Bot. The sense of disconnect I felt, returning to a place where time flowed normally.

The implications that I was now one of *them* more than I was one of *us*.

My hyperjump, fortunately, gave me something gorgeous to distract me. We were in orbit around Evershore, the kitsen homeworld. A vibrant blue planet, like all the old pictures of Earth, with clouds and seas and life. It was breathtaking.

I soared through space between the two planets. Detritus, it turned out, could *move*. There was a reason it had been built with its own protective shell, able to maintain its warmth and a day-night cycle far from any sun. It was an enormous battle station, capable of using cytonics to hyperjump around the galaxy. Indeed, many of its platforms could move on their own, like smaller battle stations.

All the planet had needed was some maintenance and a whole lot of alien slugs. Fortunately, we'd managed to provide both.

Our homeworld was even more amazing than we'd ever known. It had provided a haven to slugs—hundreds of them hiding in the tunnels far beneath the surface. Thinking of that made me reach out to Doomslug, and I sensed her spike of joy at the contact. She sent me an image of a large room on one of the platforms, where she was being cared for. Dozens of slugs—of several different varieties—populated this room alone, with human caretakers engaging with them.

Doomslug was hiding in the corner with a little bowl of what appeared to be caviar. She perked up at my contact, and sent me an immediate emotional barrage of relief. After my time in the nowhere, I was getting better at understanding her—and these days I could make out basic words from the impressions she sent.

*I thought you would be happy with the others*, I sent, remembering her joy at first seeing all those other slugs.

*Happy. And not happy*, she sent back.

*Why?*

*Confused*, she said. *Feel lost still. Feel alone still. Feel strange.*

I immediately recognized that sensation: that feeling of no longer belonging. Of seeing things...differently from everyone else. Of being an oddity. I sent her welcoming thoughts, and in a moment she was in my lap. I hoped that wouldn't cause the caretakers too much concern—I would have to send them a message. But I suspected the caretakers were accustomed to it. I'd heard from Rig and FM that caring for a large group of intelligent interdimensional teleporting slugs was proving...interesting.

Together, Doomslug and I flew through space, pretending it was the old days. I accelerated us to incredible speeds, impossible in atmosphere, and enjoyed the sensation of doing maneuvers between two planets. My brain kept panicking as it tried to track which direction was up, and I found it a neat sensation. Not too different, actually, from flying in the nowhere.

Unfortunately, duty soon came calling. My comm blinked, and a moment later Jorgen's voice came through the earpiece of my helmet.

"Spensa?" he asked. "Are you *flying*?"

"Patrols," I said. "Who can say when the Superiority will attack, you know?"

He seemed to understand, because he chuckled softly.

"Feeling better?" I asked. "Now that it's over?"

"I would be," he said, "only now I'm officially in charge. Which means I have to do something about our predicament."

"Fortunately, you don't have to do it alone," I said.

"Which is...why I'm calling you."

I let out a deep sigh—but for his sake I muted myself first. I took my finger off the mute. "What do you need?"

"A meeting," he said. "To discuss our options, and to plan our strategy."

"Today?" I asked. "You just got promoted. Shouldn't there be, I don't know, a party or something?"

I knew him well enough to predict his response. In fact, I could have mouthed along.

"We can party once our people are safe," he said. "I'd like you there, Spin. Your perspective is essential to our strategy."

A dozen excuses popped into my head. They were all stupid. He was right; I was needed. Doomslug, sensing my emotions, let out a soft fluting sound of sympathy.

“When?” I asked.

“Fifteen minutes?”

“I’ll be there.”





## Record 05T230302

### Common Variants



**HYPERSLUG** facilitates cytonic traversal

**BOOMSLUG** •  
deploys cybotic weapons

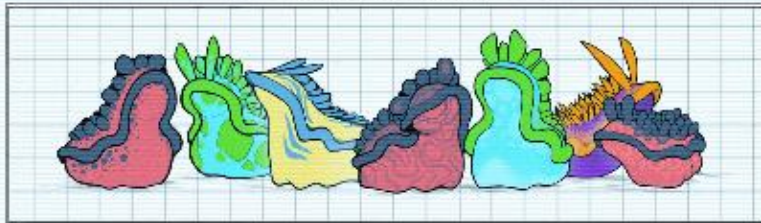


### INHIBITOR SLUG

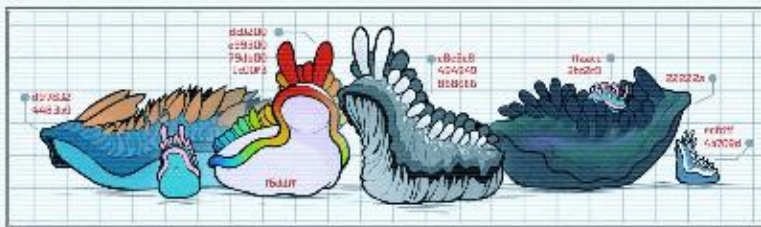
inhibits cytonic abilities

**COMMSLUG** — bursts cytonic communication

### Known Variants



### Unknown Variants



For an expanded summary of this illustration, go to [this page](#).

## 2

The meeting took place on Platform Prime, our center of operations inside Detritus's shell. This space station flew over the surface of the planet, but was well protected behind many outer layers of other platforms, flying gun emplacements, and shields.

At least Jorgen knew to pick the room with the best seats. I swiveled in my bucket-style chair, which was tight and curved, with high sides, almost like a little cockpit.

I forced myself to listen to what Ironsides was saying. The former DDF leader—now bearing the rank of admiral emeritus—had been dredged up from forced retirement because...well, we needed everyone we had. And Ironsides, for all her faults, had an eye for tactics.

"In a way, you could say we're lucky," the silver-haired woman said, gesturing at a star map on the wall that highlighted a wedge of space on the edge of the Milky Way. Our region of the galaxy, territory controlled by the Superiority. We were smack-dab in the middle of it.

"Lucky how?" Jorgen asked from his seat at the head of the long conference table. It was filled with a number of admirals, engineers, and foreign dignitaries, including Cuna, the sole senior dione on our side. A blue-skinned politician who had become a friend of mine during my days hiding as Alanik on Starsight.

"Here, let me explain," Ironsides said, shuffling through some papers.

Jorgen waited, sitting primly on the edge of his chair. How could he look so uncomfortable? These chairs were comfy and you could even swivel them with your toe. Though you did have to lounge back a little to fit

them properly, to melt into the form. That wasn't a particularly Jorgenesque way of doing things.

I studied him, enjoying the cut of his chin, the intensity of his gaze, the determination of his posture. Yeah, this new job was a good choice for him. It fit Jorgen like a glove—albeit a new one he hadn't quite broken in yet.

While Ironsides shuffled papers, the back door to the conference room opened and Cobb slipped in. He'd been the DDF head before Jorgen. Cobb had been my mentor, and was one of the wisest people I knew.

He looked like he'd aged twenty years since I'd left seven weeks ago. He leaned heavily on his cane, and his skin seemed to droop on his body. He'd nearly been killed by the bomb that had destroyed the National Assembly, but my grandmother had saved him—hyperjumping them both away. Their time in the strange trap that had held the kitsen cytonics for so long had not been kind to him.

I glanced toward Gran-Gran, sitting at the side of the room. Seeing my aged grandmother at these conferences had surprised me when I'd first returned. I mean, I knew she was a military genius and the oldest living Defiant—having lived on the starship that originally brought us to Detritus when she'd been a girl—but I never thought anyone else would appreciate that.

Jorgen did. And so she came to the meetings. Gran-Gran noticed my attention cytonically, and I sent her a question, something that was easy for me now that I'd fused with Chet.

*Is he going to be all right?* I asked.

*Cobb, you mean?* she asked. *He's the one who just came in?*

Her cytonic senses had helped her adjust to losing her sight in some ways, but like all cytonics, her powers were duller when applied to regular people.

*Yes,* I said. *He looks so old, Gran-Gran.*

*I'll try not to be offended by the sorrow in that thought,* Gran-Gran said. *Being old isn't that bad. Except for your body, your eyesight, your sense of balance, and waking up each morning feeling like you've been nailed in place.* She smiled in my direction, then the expression faded. *I don't know*

*how long it will take Cobb to recover. He didn't respond to our excursion as well as I did.*

Jorgen stood out of respect, which made the rest of us do likewise. Then Jorgen stepped over and conversed softly with Cobb, likely thanking him for coming. Cobb nodded, but looked exhausted by the walk from the infirmary, as Jorgen helped him to a seat reserved for him at the side of the room.

I knew Jorgen wished that Cobb was still in command, though Cobb had made it clear that was impossible in his current state. And so, with the weight of those bars on his shoulders, Jorgen settled back into his seat. I wished I'd been there to see him sweat when he'd finally taken command. He was cute when he went through deep personal crises balancing his belief in the rule of law with the practical need to get things done.

"Should we proceed?" Cuna asked. The dione sat with their palms pressed together, forearms on the tabletop, watching with an air of dignity and...well, a smidge of condescension. That wasn't entirely Cuna's fault though. They tried very hard, but had spent their entire life seeing themselves as someone who needed to protect and guide the species of "lesser intelligence" in the Superiority. Changing such an entrenched worldview took time.

"Yes, I have my data ready now," Ironsides said. The older woman turned, tucking her short silver hair behind her ear, and pointed at the wall as the screen changed. I leaned forward, hoping for some interesting shot of a battle—but it was just a slide with a bunch of numbers and statistics.

Great.

Why hadn't anyone *told* me how many meetings galactic war would involve? Maybe I would have surrendered. Torture couldn't possibly be worse than this. We spent longer sitting and talking than we did actually fighting anyone. Maybe I could throw something at Jorgen and get him to glare at me?

"The Superiority," Ironsides said, "was shockingly easy for Winzik to conquer. Unlike a traditional government, it doesn't rule by force but

through control of travel and resources. There are thousands of planets in the Superiority, but almost *none* of them have active defense forces.”

“That’s because,” said one of the UrDail, a male named Rinakin, “they make people abandon their ‘warlike ways’ to join.”

“Is it so bad,” Cuna replied to him, “that we strive for peace and comfort instead of anger and strife?”

“Well, it left you exposed,” Rinakin said, pointing at the statistics. “No one could resist Winzik. He conquered the entire Superiority with barely a military.”

Yeah, I liked this guy. He made good points.

“I assume that is why you think we’re lucky, Admiral?” Jorgen cut in firmly. “Our enemy controls a great deal of *space* but not a lot of *ships*.”

“Exactly,” Ironsides said. “Our victories at ReDawn and Evershore prove that we can stand against Winzik. A lot of his military is needed to patrol, police, and maintain the territory he’s taken. The offensive force left to him isn’t *that* much bigger than our own. Maybe two or three times our numbers, which is remarkable, all things considered.”

“He thought it would be easy,” I said. “He assumed nobody would fight back. And if they did, he thought he’d have the delvers as the perfect threat to keep everyone under control. Hard to resist a tyrant when he’s the only thing standing between you and a group of interdimensional horrors.”

“Nightshade has the right of it,” Ironsides said. She met my eyes. We had a history, the two of us, but she’d been a worthy foe. Right up until she’d almost gotten everyone blown up, of course.

“So, what does this tell us?” Jorgen said. “How do we proceed?”

“Though we’ve been lucky so far, sir,” Ironsides said, “the admirals and I are worried.” She flipped to a slide that showed what seemed to be production capacity. “Winzik doesn’t have a large military yet—but he has access to an *enormous* infrastructure. Here we see a list of manufactories capable of spitting out spaceworthy fighters. These numbers here indicate possible production speeds, without accounting for any hidden military fabrication plants.”

We took that all in. And it was daunting. Once Winzik brought all of his resources to bear, he'd be able to create whole *fleets* faster than we could build a single *ship*. Yes, he'd have to staff them with raw recruits, but what did that matter when you could flood a battlefield with fighters?

I saw Ironsides's point immediately. Though we'd been lucky so far, we absolutely could *not* win an extended war against the Superiority. Once Winzik ramped up production, we were done for.

I glanced around the table to see what the others were thinking. The other junior admirals were nodding. Arturo—current head of Skyward Flight, here representing all the pilots—took it in with a frown. FM—now Jorgen's right-hand woman and our head diplomat—had put her hand to her lips as she read the numbers, her eyes wide. She looked across the table, meeting my gaze.

I spared a thought for the fact that three members of my flight—all still relatively young—were in high leadership positions in the government. Unfortunately, our planet's history was such that there just *weren't* a lot of older officers. Our desperate fight for survival over the decades had turned that much more deadly near the end; even the junior *admirals* were all in their twenties. The sad reality of the DDF's struggle was that by the time we'd "won" and pushed the enemy back, almost everyone with any real battle experience had been killed.

Jorgen was, I thought curiously, the same age as Alexander the Great had been when he'd begun his conquest.

I continued scanning the room, and found it was harder to read the aliens than my friends. Rinakin looked pained, but with their violet skin and impressive bone ridges across the cheeks, his race always appeared intimidating. Made me wish my skeleton stuck out in a few places for a similar effect.

I had more experience reading the kitsen, though I didn't personally know Itchika, the female kitsen to my right, hovering above the tabletop on her platform. Her fur was greying and her clothing extremely formal, robes in an ancient style.

She was joined by a small group of other kitsen: some of their elected senators, a few newly rescued cytonics, and their head generals. Those used little chairs on the tabletop, as if at a parade. At Itchika's side stood a nervous younger kitsen. Kauri, one of their ship captains—and a friend of mine.

“So,” Itchika said, gesturing to the numbers on the screen, “our time is limited. Yes, I see.” Like the other aliens, she spoke in her own language, which was translated to English by her translation pin.

Ironsides looked at us, grim. “Based on our intel, he already has all of these plants fabricating for him. In weeks they’ll be able to field thousands of new drone fighters.”

“Drones,” I said. “That’s annoying. You mean I won’t get to feast on the blood of my enemies?” I paused. “I wonder what motor oil tastes like.”

Everyone in the room gaped at me. Except Jorgen, who laughed.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” I snapped at the others. “You invited me. This is what you get. Ironsides, what about capital ships?”

“Those will take longer to produce,” she replied. “But they *will* come. Thousands of battleships—and hundreds of carriers—by the end of the standard year.”

Scud. I’d checked what we had, adding in the kitsen and UrDail fleets. We had starfighters, yes. As many as five hundred if we needed them. But barely any capital ships.

“Spin can handle starfighters,” FM said. “Now that we have her back, we shouldn’t need to worry about drones. The remote ones fall easily to cytonics, and the autonomous ones are no match for a living pilot—at least not with the limited AI that the Superiority dares to use.”

While I appreciated her faith in me, I wasn’t nearly so confident. Maybe once upon a time I’d have boasted I could fight hundreds on my own, but I wasn’t that person any longer. I was a good fighter, but I couldn’t win a war by myself. I had a stark memory of being swarmed by hundreds of enemy ships a week ago, in the nowhere. I’d quickly been overwhelmed.

Jorgen voiced the concern for me. “How many drones could you shoot down in one fight, Spin?” he asked softly. “Twenty? Thirty?”



“Twenty maybe,” I said. “A few more if I’m lucky.”

“See?” FM said.

“And if they send ten thousand?” he asked. “Twenty thousand? Do you have any *idea* how many ships their industrial complex can churn out, once it spins up?”

FM sat back, disturbed, and the room fell silent.

Finally, a deep voice spoke from my right. “The raging river is never kind to the lone leaf.” A kitsen on a hovering platform moved up to my right. He wore a ceramic mask, white with red stripes. Hesho, once emperor of the kitsen. He’d taken to covering his face and calling himself Darkshadow, the Masked Exile.

Scud, I wished I could get away with something that awesome.

“So we have to move quickly,” Rinakin said. “Win fast. Any chance we can recruit more planets to our cause?”

We looked to FM, who had been leading recruitment efforts.

“We’ve been trying,” she said. “We have a few leads. But...most of them are afraid. Our three planets found one another because we were all in the right position—technologically advanced enough to have our own fighters, but not fully subsumed by the Superiority. Most of the others are either too strongly indoctrinated or not advanced enough to fight back. The burls might join us. And perhaps the tradori—but their planet has *seventy* different governments!”

Seventy? Different nations, on *one* planet? I mean, I knew that Earth had once had far more, but it still boggled my mind.

They dug deeper into the details, and the discussion grew more grim. I shuffled in my seat, suddenly finding it less comfortable. Sure, the mighty three hundred Spartans had stood against overwhelming numbers at Thermopylae...but they’d fallen in the end.

I couldn’t help thinking about my friends dying, one at a time, as we were overwhelmed by enemy ships. And as I did, something trembled inside me. A quivering that started at my core, vibrating like a muscle spasm, but bearing with it a sense of *power*. Panicked, I tried to fight it down.

But I failed.

Cups on the table started to rattle. The wall screen went haywire, flashing on and off. Objects in the room started to vanish, popping in and out of reality. Chet trembled as he felt my emotions. And the voices...my thoughts...my fears...began to radiate and echo through the room.

*Dead. All dead.*

*Lost. All lost.*

*Failed. All failed.*

I gasped, trembling, and slapped my hands on the table, bringing the entirety of my will to bear against the strange outburst. I clawed back control with effort, and the trembling lessened and then ceased. I looked up, sweat streaming down my face.

The room had gone silent, and I knew that they'd heard those words in their minds. I'd broadcast them uncontrollably. Cuna looked up from where they'd been writing on a notepad—which had been teleported away, leaving them holding empty air.

Scud. I felt ashamed. And horrified. I'd done something like this the other day, by accident, but not on this scale. Today's outburst was far worse.

Whatever I was—whatever *we* were—it wasn't human any longer.

"You...all right, Spin?" Jorgen asked.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. His expression was compassionate—bless him—but most of the others looked somewhere between terrified and uncomfortable. Cuna was smiling, showing teeth—a sign of aggression for their people—and the kitsen had pulled back in a huddle. Hesho hovered in beside me, seeming stoic, though he was hard to read behind that mask.

"Perhaps," Jorgen said, "we should take a short break. There are refreshments in the adjoining room."

The meeting participants nodded, rising and chatting softly. I huddled down deeper in my pod of a chair, and didn't look at Ironsides as she walked past. She'd been one of those who had warned against the dangers of cytonics—people with the "defect." She had stopped after my ability to hyperjump had saved us all from the lifebuster, yet I couldn't help feeling I

had now become the very thing she'd warned us against. A dangerous, uncontrolled entity.

Did I belong in this meeting? Or did I belong in a holding cell somewhere?

*Well, that was dramatic!* a voice said in my head.

I was getting more and more accustomed to the sensation of another cytonic speaking into my mind. I'd been practicing with Gran-Gran, Jorgen, and even Alanik. But this wasn't any of them. It was a perky, faintly masculine voice—excitable and...

"M-Bot?" I whispered. "What in the heavens?"

*I'm a ghost, he said in my mind. Boo!*

### 3

“**W**hat?” I said. “How?”

*I promised to haunt you, he said. Remember? You said it was impossible, since I was an AI. Ha! Well, how wrong you were. Here I am!*

I felt a flood of emotions. Joy at hearing his voice. Confusion at how he was in my head. Relief to know that he was apparently still functioning.

*Where were you? I sent. I’ve been looking!*

*I hid! he said. I don’t know how. I just kind of...looked inward. They were hunting for me, so I did it by instinct, Spensa. You really tried looking for me? That’s so sweet.*

I held back tears. When I’d left him, his physical housing had been *destroyed* by the delvers in the nowhere. I’d known he was alive, but hearing his cheerful voice? It was such a scudding comfort.

*I worried that you wouldn’t remember me, I told him. That you’d become like them.*

*I am like them! he said. Just not in the bad ways! I’ve kind of always been like them. I just didn’t know it!*

It was true. Chet’s knowledge was my knowledge, to an extent, and I understood. The strange nature of the nowhere had transformed M-Bot into a new being. Though in truth, that process had started centuries before, as his processors had reached into the nowhere to compute faster. Over time, that had changed him from an AI into a living creature.

This distinction was a fight I kept having with the rest of the DDF and its allies. They kept saying things like, “So the delvers are actually rogue AIs?” Which was far too limiting, far too small-minded a way to describe

them. Yes, they'd started as artificial intelligences. Just like humans had started as some kind of apelike ancestor.

The delvers had evolved into something completely different. As had M-Bot. He'd become self-aware—a person, not a thing. As distantly removed from an AI as a human was from its progenitor species.

Yet here he was. In my head. I sent him relief, images of me smiling, and the warmth of a hearth, and the joy of emerging from the darkness into light. I did this by instinct, communicating as a slug—or a delver—would.

*Oh!* he said. *That tickles. I can be tickled now that I don't have a body, apparently. That's strange. Is that strange? I think that's strange. Is that Chet inside your soul? Say hi for me.*

Scud, I'd missed him. I teared up a little, awkwardly, and realized that Jorgen had lingered in the room and was looking at me. He probably thought my tears were because I had disappeared his coffee, and so he wanted to help. I wasn't sure how much help I could stomach at the moment though. Fortunately, I'd seen Gran-Gran encouraging Hesho and FM to give me some space, or they'd probably have stayed as well.

*Sorry to have not found you earlier,* M-Bot said. *I'm new to being a ghost. It's not at all like I imagined. Far less painful. But just now, I felt you vibrating from the somewhere, sending ripples into this place. The delvers noticed, I'm afraid. But so did I. Yay! Oh, is that Jorgen? He seems concerned.*

*He's always concerned,* I said as Jorgen walked over. *But this time he has a good reason. I'm...a little unstable. Maybe I should talk to him for a moment.*

*Sure, okay, fine,* he replied. *I can wait. It's not like I'm going to get more dead. Please don't call an exorcist, if you have any. I understand that would be bad.*

*You're not actually a ghost.*

*I don't know that—and you don't either. So, boo! Say hi to Jorgen for me.*

Jorgen settled down next to me, arms folded on the tabletop. He always looked so serious, so solemn, so *thoughtful*. I liked that about him. Ideas

had their own weight with Jorgen. Words had substance. And the more I grew to know him, the more I understood why. Because words, rules, ideas—they were how he connected with and protected those around him.

It all came back to that day I'd seen him alone in our training room, running simulation after simulation to see what he'd done wrong after we'd lost Morningtide. Jorgen always wanted to do what was right—because that was how best to help the people in his life.

He sat there for a long time, deep in thought. Scud, how had I ever thought his face could be anything other than sultry?

"How worried should I be?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," I admitted, flopping back in my pod-seat. "I don't even know what I'm *doing*. I can't control it, but not in an 'Oh no, I'm too inexperienced' sort of way. More in an 'Oh scud, I absorbed a space monster' sort of way. It just *happens*. I'll try to keep it from being a danger to anyone."

Could I actually promise that though?

He turned, then put his hand on my arm. "Spensa, I wasn't talking about that. How worried should I be *for you*? Are you all right? You feel distant."

"Space monster," I muttered, meeting his eyes. "In my *soul*."

"Right," he said. He searched my eyes. I knew what he wanted; there was a subtext here. He was worried about me. And worried about us.

I didn't know what to say. I *wanted* to leap to my feet and kiss him and tell him to stop being silly and stop worrying. But I couldn't.

My silence wasn't fair to him. "I just felt M-Bot," I told him. "He's alive, in the nowhere."

"What, really?" Jorgen perked up. "That's the first good thing that's happened in a week. How is he?"

*I'm me!* M-Bot said. *Tell him I'm me. Very me.*

"He says he's very much himself," I said. "And I believe him. He seems to have escaped the attention of the delvers, and is existing like they do, in the nowhere, without a body."

"That's incredible," Jorgen said. "Surely that's an advantage of some sort?"

“Surely.”

We sat together for a few more minutes, the long table somehow making the room feel huge and hollow, now that it was empty. Scud, he was worrying about me again.

“What about you?” I asked, to try to deflect. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than I thought I would,” he said. “Maybe part of me still doesn’t believe my parents are gone. But today’s ceremony...it’s what they wanted for me. Misguided though they were sometimes, I have to accept that they knew me. That these bars were going to find their way to my shoulders eventually.” He met my eyes. “I’m doing this because it needs to be done, not because they wanted it. Though it makes me think that they’ll be happy to see me, when they look down from Valhalla.”

I rested my hand on his, on the tabletop. He didn’t often talk about his religious heritage, but it was there—a part of him, like so much else. He turned his hand over and squeezed mine. But there was so much tension in his eyes.

“Jorgen?” I forced out. “When I was in there...lost...you were my anchor. You are the lighthouse that brought me home.”

He smiled then, and some of the tension seemed to melt off him. “When you were in there,” he said, “and I was trying to make sense of all that was happening, I kept asking myself, ‘What would Spensa do?’ Trying to be a little more like you helped me keep pushing forward.”

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head.

“Jorgen, that’s a *terrible* idea!” I dropped his hand and gestured at myself. “Have you *seen* me try to solve problems? Things end up on fire. Or dead. Usually both!”

“Things get done when you’re around.”

“*Things*, yes,” I said. “Things like me running off and moonlighting as an interdimensional space pirate! ‘What would Spensa do?’ Honestly, Jorgen, I thought better of you.”

He kept smiling, though it faded as he glanced over at the statistics on the wall—the projector image having recovered from my episode. He

slipped out of his seat and stepped up to the numbers. I joined him, taking in his worried expression—which was more unnerving to me than the numbers themselves.

My heart bled for him, knowing that all of this was on his shoulders. Unfairly so, but again, what was fairness to us? We had rarely tasted that particular nectar. We survived on algae and rat meat instead.

“I feel,” he said softly, “like I’m a lone man trying to hold up a collapsing building. I know it’s not true. I know I’m not the only one working for our future—but still...the walls of the house tremble. The ceiling buckles. Worse, I know an earthquake is coming that will shake the entire cavern. And I’m barely keeping things together as it is...” He turned to me. “They’re going to crush us, Spensa. While you were gone, we failed you—and we’re still failing. We’re just doing it in slow motion.”

“Failing? Jorgen, that’s *nonsense*,” I said. “You recruited not one, but *two* planets to our cause. You rescued Cuna and figured out how to work Detritus’s defenses. Scud! You found the taynix!”

While I’d been playing spy on Starsight, Jorgen had followed cytonic impressions deep into the bowels of the planet and found the slugs’ breeding ground. Because of him, we had slugs that could hyperjump ships, others that could create cytonic attacks, and even ones that could block all cytonic abilities in a region. And then there were the other varieties whose powers we hadn’t learned yet.

It was increasingly obvious that the Superiority knew how to manipulate the various kinds of taynix. The inhibitor field around Starsight that had prevented me from hyperjumping in or out? Facilitated by a slug. A different type sent the communications the Superiority used to connect their empire, link their drones, deliver commands to their officials. An empire all built on the tiny backs of enslaved cytonic creatures.

I reached out to Doomslug, who I’d left in my room before coming to the meeting. She reached back, empathetic. Unfortunately, my worry about all of this made that vibration inside me start up again.

Cuna’s notebook appeared near their seat, then flopped down onto the table. Jorgen started, then glanced at me. I wrestled my emotions back, and



as my frustration subsided I felt something new. A distorting of self, a fuzzing of reality, and a link to him—mind to mind. Cytonic to cytonic.

Jorgen was worried about me. While I'd heard him say it, this time I *felt* it. Scud. That was wonderful, but dangerous. I didn't want him to feel pain or worry for me. He had way too many other things to deal with.

Despite myself, I withdrew, blocking him.

"You're not a monster, Spensa," he whispered. "You've *never* been a monster."

"I never said I was."

"You feel it," he said.

*I agree*, M-Bot said to me. *You're not a monster, Spensa.*

Chet and I...we weren't so certain. We'd become something dangerous. Something that was contemplating killing all of his kind. What was that if not monstrous?

But if there was one thing stories had taught me about monsters, it was that they were strong. I nodded at the statistics. "You're frightened, Jorgen. Scud, *Cobb* is frightened. But maybe...maybe we shouldn't be. We never broke before the Krell. Why would we bend before numbers on a page?"

"I'm not bending," he said. "I'm just...feeling the weight of it. Ironsides is right—once the enemy's production capacities come fully to bear on this war, we'll be crushed. We've survived before because Winzik's hands were bound by policy, the compassion of others, or his lack of resources. He's lined those impediments up, Spin, and executed them one at a time with a destructor blast to the head. We're next."

"So," I replied, "maybe what we *need* is a monster."

"Spensa—"

"I had a chance to come home," I said. "Right as I jumped into the nowhere over a month ago, I had an opportunity to return."

"You told me."

"I stayed. We both agreed I should stay. Because we both knew this was coming—a fight we couldn't win with pilots and guns alone." I tapped my sternum. "I chose this path. I've become the weapon we need. I just have to figure out how to use it before..."

As I trailed off, he cocked his head, then leaned closer. “Before *what*, Spensa?”

“Do you know,” I said, “what happens to the hero at the end of the stories?”

“Depends on the story.”

“They go home,” I whispered.

I felt the room vibrate around me. Jorgen’s coffee appeared on the table again, though three of the chairs vanished.

*Are you...are you all right?* M-Bot said in my head. *The delvers are going wild right now, Spensa.*

At the end of the story...at the end of the story, the hero came home, and found herself transformed...into someone who didn’t belong, and could never belong, with the people she’d left behind. It was the same in almost every story I’d read.

Heroes didn’t get to stay and live in the new world they helped create. Even if I pulled off some kind of miracle and saved my people...that would be the end of it. For me.

I gritted my teeth so tightly my jaw ached. But with balled fists and force of will, I tamped down my emotions again, stopped the vibrations. Then I gave Jorgen a smile. Because he needed one.

“You know,” I said, “I really should be jealous.”

“Of...my incredible new haircut?”

“Of the slugs,” I said, punching him in the arm. “When I left, I was the quirky girl with a slug. I mean, who has a pet slug? It was unusual. Distinctive. Now I get back and you have *dozens* of them?”

“Maybe hundreds...” he mumbled.

“In eight varieties.”

“We think there may be even more...”

“And everyone is cuddling them and carrying them around like babies,” I said, hands in the air. “FM probably *bathes* with hers.”

“I know you think you’re exaggerating,” he said, “but I’m pretty sure she does.”

“Next thing you know,” I said, “*everyone* will be quoting Sun Tzu and savoring the sounds of bones breaking! I won’t be the least bit special anymore.”

He stepped closer. Uncomfortably—or in this instance far *too* comfortably—close. He leaned down. “No,” he whispered. “Nothing could ever make you less special. To me.”

I forced myself to stay there, to pretend that nothing was wrong. Smiling—and keeping a firm lid on my emotions so Jorgen wouldn’t see through the lie. I pretended that this could all end well, admiring his eyes until Cobb stepped in.

Which gave an excuse to break the moment. I rushed over to help him as he stumbled, despite his cane. Jorgen stepped back, trying to recover some decorum.

“Ready to get back to it?” Cobb asked, holding my arm, eyeing the two of us. “Or should I stall? I have a story about Ironsides when she was in flight school that always results in an awkward silence. Good for thinking. And for making people too uncomfortable to bother me.”

“No need,” Jorgen said, standing up straight, visibly shouldering the burden of leadership.

I glanced at Cobb, who nodded and let me help him sit. “How are you?” I asked him.

“Awful,” he said. “Feel like I’m just climbing out of a ship after being in an uncontrolled spin for hours—which starts again each time I stand up.” He glanced at me. “I’m here. Your grandmother saved my life, and for that I’m grateful. But let’s say I’m glad I was able to get all of you ready in time for this.”

I frowned, considering that comment. During flight school, I’d felt a connection with Cobb as he’d encouraged me to become the woman I had to be now. I’d always assumed that had been special treatment. Now I knew that he’d spent similar time with Jorgen, maybe everyone in our flight.

Right then, I figured something out. Cobb’s actions had all been deliberate—not just with me, but with all of us. He hadn’t merely been

doing his job. He'd been training the next admiral of the fleet, and I got the sneaking suspicion he'd known it all along.

As people began to file back in—or in the case of the kitsen, fly in on their platforms—Jorgen stood tall before that daunting wall of statistics. I desperately wanted to do something to help. My entire purpose in traveling the nowhere had been to give us an edge, some way of solving problems that would be impossible otherwise. Could M-Bot be the key to that somehow? Maybe he could contact the Broadsiders or...

Wait. I looked up at the statistics again and realized something. Sure, our enemies would overwhelm us once their production capacity got going. But to do that, they needed raw materials.

"Jorgen," I said. "I have an idea. And this time it might actually be a *good* one. But to build on it, we'll have to send for someone smarter than I am."

## 4

I slapped Rig down in the seat before the entire council. Once, I might have felt guilty about dragging him up into the spotlight. He'd always hated things like this.

Today though, he took it in stride. As if being on display in front of the leaders of three planets was no big deal. And...maybe to him it wasn't, not any longer. He winked at FM. Like, actually *winked*. She winked back.

Those two were cute and all, but I suddenly felt even more alien than... well...the aliens. My best friend had fallen in love, and I'd missed it entirely. He'd cracked open the secrets of our homeworld, and I'd been playing pirate.

*No, Chet said. We were learning. We might be something strange. Something unnatural, even. But we were not just playing.*

Good to be reminded of that. Still, I'd missed so much. I leaned down beside Rig, who gave me a reluctant eye roll, like he'd always done when I'd gotten him into trouble as kids. That, in an instant, made the awkwardness evaporate.

"Rig," I declared to him, "I need *science*."

"You need *therapy*."

"*You* need better jokes."

"*You* need a better sense of humor."

We grinned at each other. Then remembered we were in front of a bunch of boring military types. He cleared his throat. "What kind of 'science' do you need, Spensa? This isn't like when you asked if I could turn your stuffed bear into a remote-controlled assassin device?"

“Not as awesome as that, I’m afraid.”

“Who were you going to assassinate, anyway?” he asked. “You were *ten*.”

“Ninjas,” I said. “Gran-Gran had been telling stories, and...well, I assumed my future would include *far* more ninjas than it has.”

“I might be able to fix that,” Hesho said, hovering down beside me. “Assuming the translator has the right term, in our language, for the ancient warrior assassins of lore.”

“You have *ninjas*?” I asked him. “Kitsen ninjas?”

“Indeed,” he said. “As the Masked Exile, I am technically part of their tradition. It’s not as practical an art as the stories make it sound—more a method of training the mind and soul. But as we bring peace to mind and soul, we learn to bring stillness to the world around us.”

I was barely listening.

Fifteen-centimeter-tall.

Furry.

*Ninjas*.

Scud. The universe was awesome after all.

Anyway. Plan. Saving everyone from the Superiority. “Rig,” I said, leaning beside his chair, which in turn was at the head of the long table of dignitaries. “When I was in the nowhere, I encountered a mining station where the Superiority took raw materials from the nowhere. It was a *big scudding deal* to them.”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “No acclivity stone, no ships.”

“Sure, but most of their travel is in space,” I said. “Acclivity stone is used to hover us up in the air on a planet. In space, we use boosters. So why the acclivity stone?”

“I think you know why,” he said.

“I want you to explain it. So everyone understands.”

“Well, the mechanism of the power transfer of acclivity stone and power matrixes are quite complex. Even a nuclear—”

“Okay, less science,” I said. “Give us the Spensa version.”

“Starships need to generate thrust,” he said. “It’s not *just* a matter of power. If we had to rely on chemical propellant...well, starfighter-size ships wouldn’t be possible, not without running out of propellant very quickly. Fortunately, we have a compact energy source in the form of acclivity stone, which can also generate thrust.”

“And it gets used up?” I guessed. “To move ships.”

“Slowly, but yes,” he said. “No acclivity stone. No starships. It’s that simple.”

“So...” I said, gesturing to the big list of numbers, “if they lose access to their acclivity stone mines, then *none* of this will matter. Winzik can build a thousand ships a day if he wants—but none of them will be able to fly.”

I looked to the room. They were considering this, based on their thoughtful expressions.

“The Superiority will have stockpiles,” Rig said.

“Yes,” I said, “but how long will those stockpiles last if we’re blowing up his ships? Particularly if we make certain to destroy the salvage? The Superiority is fragile in this regard. They don’t have a hundred mining stations in the nowhere. When I talked to those who lived inside, they said there were only four.”

“This is true,” Cuna said, drawing all eyes in the room. Most of us were crowded around the foot of the table. Cuna stood behind the crowd, hands clasped before themselves. “You expose a weakness of our way of thinking. If we had a thousand mining stations, then it would be easy to let a few slip from our fingers. To keep a proper grip, the policy has been to consolidate and concentrate. Fewer but more impactful mining stations. Unused hyperdrives kept together in vast storages. Information routing through a few distinct points to maintain control. It was always about control.”

“It made you fragile,” I said. “Both from within—as proven by Winzik’s coup—and from without. Because you never imagined a world where one of the lesser species would be strong enough to bring down your mining stations.”

“Yes,” Cuna said. “We were wrong in this, Spensa. As we were in so many things.” They spread their hands out before me. “I am sorry.”

“You’re the only one doing anything to try to fix it, Cuna,” FM said. “I won’t say I like being called a lesser species, but at least you’re willing to change.”

“I like this plan,” Rinakin said, tapping the table with a bone-white fingernail. “It is bold, but strategic. It will preserve lives, but will also give us an enormous advantage.”

“If we can hit their mining stations,” Cobb agreed from the side of the room, “then they’re going to start sweating. Yes, they’ll have stockpiles—but right now they know for certain they can win a long war against us. If they lose access to acclivity stone...”

“Spin,” Jorgen said to me, “you know where the mining stations can be found?”

“I know where one is, in the belt of the nowhere,” I said, frowning. “I have friends there. But I don’t know about the others. They said there are three, but what if there are more—other, secret locations?”

“We don’t need to know where they are in the nowhere,” Jorgen said. “We need to know where they are on this side. If we strike and eliminate those facilities, that will destroy the portals—and effectively prevent our enemy from resupplying.”

“Agreed,” said Itchika, the kitsen general hovering on her platform above the tabletop. “Attacking anywhere *inside* the nowhere is impossible, or at least highly dangerous. But each of those mining stations will need to feed to a location in *this* dimension. We need to destroy those.”

Something about that bothered me, but I couldn’t quite figure out what. I stayed quiet as all eyes looked to Cuna.

Cuna shook their head. “I do not know the location of the mining stations in the nowhere or the supply depots they are connected to on this side.” They looked up and drew their lips to a line. A dione smile. “But I *do* know of an information nexus we can raid to get those secrets. If you are willing. I doubt Winzik will expect a strike there.”



“Perfect,” Jorgen said. “Then we’re agreed?” He looked to the others for their responses. They nodded one at a time, except the kitsen, who raised their fists in a sign of agreement.

Jorgen continued. “Winzik’s problem is that he’s ruling a vast empire. He’s stretched thin, and has an *enormous* front to protect.”

“We’ll want to raid this information nexus quickly,” I said. “Then get out. Try to cover up what we were after to keep him in the dark.”

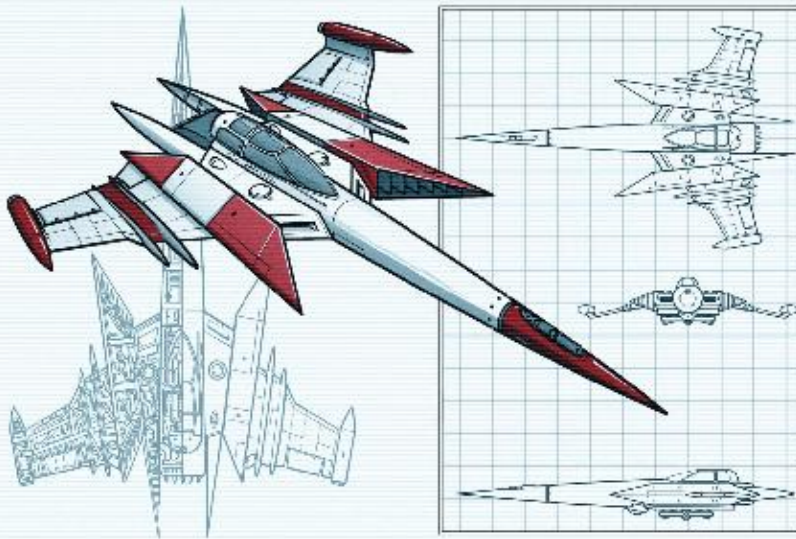
“Then as soon as possible,” Itchika said, “we destroy the gateways they’re using to get into the nowhere. Cutting them off from acclivity stone completely.”

The group nodded. There would be fine details to plan, but I knew it would soon be time to get back in the cockpit. This time to do some fighting.

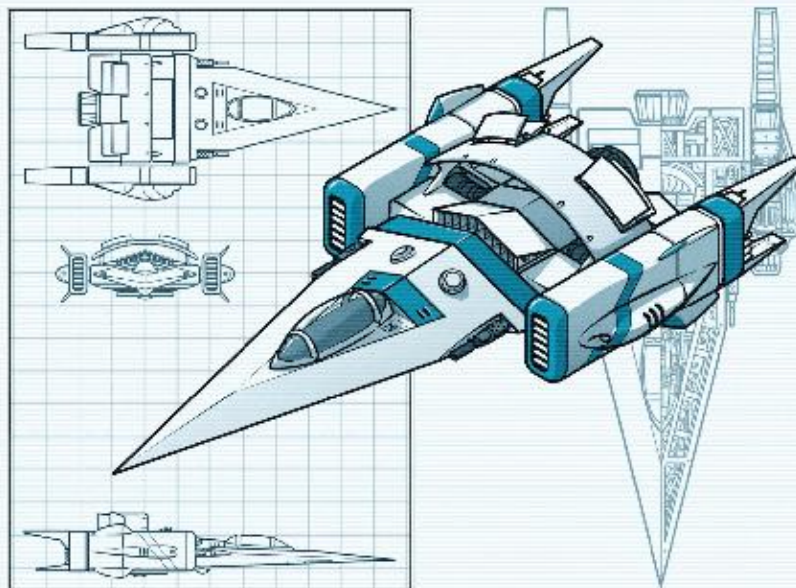


## Faction Starfighters Overview Record DST230309

◦ ════════ ▷ DOF Poco ◁ ════════ ◦



◦ ════════ ▷ Superiority Interceptor ◁ ════════ ◦



For an expanded summary of this illustration, go to [this page](#).

## 5

I hauled myself up the ladder to Skyward Six, a Poco-class starfighter, like I'd trained on in flight school. After days of planning, the time was right.

Today we were going to raid the Superiority information nexus, to get the locations of the mining stations. I forced my nerves into line. It was my first mission back with my team, but it shouldn't be a difficult one. Just a quick bash and grab. I could do that. No problem.

I settled into the cockpit. It should have felt familiar, welcoming—but it was a tad larger than the cockpit of the ship I'd flown in the nowhere. Though the control schemes were similar, I kept finding myself reaching for things and missing by a few centimeters.

Down below, Sadie—the new girl—laughed and joked with Nedd as they split toward their separate ships. I was accustomed to her being timid and uncertain, but now she laughed with a boisterous confidence.

The way Nedd joked with her had a twisted kind of familiarity. I'd been on the other end of those jokes so many times. Now it was someone else. I couldn't help feeling replaced. By Sadie, or by Alanik—who had joined Skyward Flight in my absence. She chatted with Arturo as ground crews finished up with their ships. There was an irony there—the woman I'd imitated now seemed more comfortable with my friends than I did.

I kept expecting Jorgen to board his ship and start giving us orders. But the admiral of the fleet couldn't be spared to fly missions.

Everything was different. That didn't make it *wrong*, but I couldn't help feeling it was another sign. A portent.

I settled down into my cockpit, and found that the ship had been outfitted with a...well, a slug holster. Almost all the ships flew with a hyperslug now; it was an incredible advantage in space battles to be able to teleport. Not just offensively either. The slugs were also a last-ditch “eject button.” As a ship was falling to destructor fire, the slug could grab the pilot and teleport to safety.

So the cockpits had been modified with slings, on the left side underneath where the canopy closed. A sling was best for helping the slug withstand g-forces, and while by design there wasn’t a lot of room inside a cockpit, that location tended to be *somewhat* out of the way.

I put Doomslug in the sling and gave her a good scratch on the head. She fluted at me consolingly, sensing my mood. To distract myself, I went through the preflight checklist, just as Cobb had taught me. We trusted the ground crews with our lives, and it was rare that I’d catch something they didn’t—but a pilot has to take charge of her ship and her equipment. Looking over everything again wasn’t about distrust. It was about responsibility.

My hands knew what to do—I’d drilled on these checks so many times, I was pretty sure if you handed my corpse a control sphere, it would twist the mechanism to determine the calibration. That, unfortunately, meant that I could think while I worked. The sense of not fitting in, of having lost everything, returned. I—

“Are you moping?” a voice asked from my right. “In the cockpit of a *starship*. Never thought I’d see the day.”

I jumped, turning to find that someone had climbed the short ladder beside my ship and was peeking in. Kimmalyn had pulled her black hair into a long ponytail to prepare for flying. She folded her arms on the edge of the cockpit, inspecting me with deep brown eyes.

“Spensa Nightshade, sad?” she said. “In a starfighter?”

“I’m not sad,” I said, checking the booster controls.

“You’re moping,” Kimmalyn said again. “The Saint said that the best moping must be done alone.”

“She did, did she?”

“Indeed.”

“So...”

“So I must never leave someone alone to mope,” Kimmalyn said, “as I *never* want a person to experience the best kind of moping. It’s also the worst kind, you see.”

She leaned down, head on her arms, watching me.

“Shouldn’t you be checking in with your wingmate?” I asked.

“Yup.” She didn’t move.

“That’s Sadie, I understand.”

“She’ll be flying with one of the kitsen ships today.”

I sighed, turning away from the prechecks. “Kimmalyn. I should fly on my own. I’m dangerous.”

“Stars help us,” she said, “if a soldier intent on killing the enemy happens to be dangerous.”

“I don’t mean dangerous to them. I mean dangerous to *everyone*.”

“I see.”

I continued my checklist, but felt Kimmalyn there. It was unfair how the woman could somehow *loom* while pretending to do nothing of the sort.

“Well?” I finally snapped.

“In the caverns where I grew up,” Kimmalyn said, “it’s not *polite* to ask folks about demonic entities attached to their souls. One simply *doesn’t* bring up such topics.” She smiled.

In addition to her affable looming, Kimmalyn could be relentless. Positive and cheerful the entire way. But as stubborn as the very stones of the caverns.

“What,” I said at last, “do you want to know?”

“Are you all right?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure.”

“Then it’s good you have a friend on your wing, isn’t it?” She leaned forward. “The Saint said a great number of things on friendship, Spensa. Shockingly, none are applicable now. So I just want to tell you that I’m here.”

“Everything is so strange,” I said. “Wrong and different. Whatever I’ve become, the delvers fear it. Wisely. I need to walk a line between using what I’ve discovered about them and not letting it hurt the rest of you.”

Kimmalyn took that in, then nodded.

“How is it?” I said. “That you always know when to stay quiet and when to talk?”

“Good parenting,” Kimmalyn said.

“Which means...”

“When I said something stupid, my mother would make me scrub the cavern floor and think about why,” she replied. “It helps give perspective and provides a *very* clean floor.” She shrugged. “I have to think about what you said. Anything I could tell you now...well, it would sound very wise. Naturally.”

“Naturally.”

“But I don’t think it would actually help. This *is* a difficult situation. To pretend I have an easy answer would be to mock your very real worries.” She leaned forward into the cockpit. “I’ll repeat this instead, Spensa. I’m here. That’s all. I’m *here*.”

“I...” I began.

*Maybe, M-Bot said in my head, you could just let yourself relax a little. Also, I’m still here, spying on you. It’s a ghost thing.*

And scud. He was right. I was *really* in trouble, wasn’t I? The disembodied AI had more emotional fluency these days than I did.

Unfortunately, there was another feeling too: Chet’s concern mirrored mine, and contrasted M-Bot’s optimism. Chet understood. The dread that I might cause pain to my friends. Chet had lost someone very special long ago, and that pain was still raw.

“I appreciate the words, Kimmalyn,” I said. “They’re what I need right now.”

She smiled. Then turned as the ladder jostled. A moment later Nedd popped up next to her, half hanging off the side of the ladder—which, designed for ground crews to do maintenance, was wide enough for two people. As long as one wasn’t Nedd.

“Hey!” he said to me. And stars...he was still growing the mustache. Over a week now.

Usually Nedd was...well, he was the human embodiment of bedhead. If the stretch you give after sitting too long had a personality, that would be Nedd. He had a large oval face, with features that were a *tad* too big. He somehow managed to look even *more* disheveled with the blond hair (a few strands at least) growing (just not quickly) from his upper lip. Scud, should I tell him?

He didn't really have a mustache. He had a lip comb-over.

“What are we doing?” he asked the two of us. “Planning? That’s good. I like to plan.”

“You do?” I asked.

“Sure. Have a *real* good plan for how to prank Arturo later. But listen, I have something I wanted to tell you.” He jostled Kimmalyn for space on the ladder. “Spin, you shouldn’t rely on me in the fight today. I’m probably going to pop off and take a nap.”

“*What?*”

“Stayed up late with FM and Arturo last night,” he explained, “teaching Alanik to play poker. I made a *ton*. Couldn’t give up, you know. Not when there was a sucker to bleed.”

“Nedd,” Kimmalyn said, “you shouldn’t take advantage of someone on her first day playing.”

“What?” he said. “Alanik? Nah, she picked it up immediately. Did just fine. But Arturo is *terrible* at poker. You seen him try to bluff? I didn’t get much sleep, but it’s all good, since you’re back now. You’re worth three or four of me out there, at least. So I figure I can take a nap while you mop up all the Krell.”

He grinned at me, and while I knew it was a joke, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was being serious. That was how things went with Nedd. He had a...disarming sense of buffoonery.

Surely he wasn’t so self-aware as to do it on *purpose*, was he? Disarm us by being like that? And the mustache? Was it...part of the act? I



dismissed that idea almost immediately. All the while, Nedd continued to grin at me.

“Nedd,” Kimmalyn whispered loudly, “don’t smile so much. She’s *trying to brood*. You’re ruining the moment.”

“Oh,” he said. “Why?”

“She says she’s dangerous.”

“She’d better be!” he replied. “I mean, it’s her job. Hey, want to play poker later?”

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn said.

“You always say that,” Nedd replied. “I keep trying to figure out what it means. Which stars are mine?”

“As many as you happen to need, dear.”

“So in my case...”

“Lots,” Kimmalyn said. “Lots and lots and lots and lots. All the stars, Nedd. *All* those blessed stars.”

“Right, sounds good,” he said. “I’ll take ’em, Quirk.” He glanced at me. “I’ll need you to bring the brooding down to, say, half as much. If you don’t we’ll be over quota, and Jorgen used up all of our supply last month. Scud, even Arturo has been doing too much lately. I think I’m the only one in this entire flight who *hasn’t* been draining our brooding quota.”

“And me?” Kimmalyn asked.

“You pontificate,” he said. “That’s brooding, but fancier.”

“Are you two quite done?” I asked. “I have a checklist to get through, and we’re under ten minutes to launch.”

“Sorry,” Nedd said. He started to climb down, but then stopped. Cleared his throat. “Spin. It’s good to fly with you again. Just wanted to say that, you know?”

“You pulled us from the washouts,” Kimmalyn agreed. “This is where you belong, with us. And if the piece doesn’t fit, well, we’ll just have to cut out some more room until it does.”

“Damn right,” Nedd said. “Whatever she meant—went over my head completely—I’m sure it was right.” He paused again and looked from me to Kimmalyn. “So...this mustache. How—”

“It’s awful,” Kimmalyn said.

He blinked in surprise, and I’ll admit I did a double take myself. Had... had *Kimmalyn* just said that?

“Did you say—” Nedd began.

“It’s awful.” Kimmalyn put both hands in front of her mouth, as if trying to hide how much she was smiling. “It’s *terrible*, Nedd. It’s like someone glued a rat to your face, then ripped it off really quickly, leaving a few hairs behind! It’s like you shaved off a real mustache, but missed a few spots. It’s truly terrible.” She let out a little squeal of delight. “I’ve been waiting to tell you! I can’t believe I did.”

“I...can’t believe it either,” he said. “You’re usually, uh, more...subtle.”

“The mustache doesn’t deserve subtlety, Nedd,” she said. “It deserves a mercy killing.”

“Oh. Uh, well then.” He looked to me, as if for support.

“I’ve got a knife,” I said, reaching for the one I wore strapped to my leg. “Hold still and—”

He went scrambling down the ladder. Smart man. Kimmalyn gave me another smile. “I’m here,” she said, then followed him down.

“Here,” Doomsbug said. Mimicking the word, yes, but also the meaning. I gave her a scratch in thanks, then finished my checklist. When I looked up from inspecting my emergency crash pack, there was a ninja on my dashboard. A furry, fifteen-centimeter ninja in a red-and-white mask. He stepped off his hover platform, then looked around. “Hmmm. No kitsen seat in this one. Where would you like me?”

“Hesho?” I said. “I thought you’d go back to your people.”

“The Masked Exile has no people,” he said.

“But—”

He reached up and undid the mask, removing it and wiping his snout. He took a long breath. “I cannot go back, Spensa,” he said. “Their emperor, you see, is dead.”

“But you’re alive!” I said. “You...” I trailed off, noting his somber expression. “They don’t want you back?”

“My survival creates many political...irregularities. My people, at long last, have adopted a provisional democracy. If the emperor—who died dramatically in defense of his planet—were to suddenly show up again... well, I adopted the mask for a reason. It conveyed the intended message: *I* might have lived. But Hesho, their emperor, did *not*.”

He looked up at me, hands holding his mask, proud—but also supplicating.

“You’re welcome in this cockpit, Hesho,” I said. “Honestly, I’ve been worried. I flew with you or M-Bot as my copilot for so long that I’ve come to rely upon it. I fly better with you. We’ll just have to figure out how to get you a seat...”

“No need,” Hesho said, replacing his mask, then waving for some kitsen to fly in. They set a kind of seat on the dash, near the comm controls. It was round, like an elevated cup holder, and a kitsen could strap inside. With minimal work, they got it magnetically attached.

“We’ve been experimenting,” a kitsen engineer said, seeing my curious expression. “One of our kind flew with your leader, Jorgen Weight, for some time—training him in his powers. We’ve been trying methods of making that easier.”

I nodded, thoughtful. We flew with one person in most of our ships, because keeping the weight down was paramount—and we never had any pilots to spare. But knowing how much having M-Bot as a copilot had helped me...

“Don’t suppose,” I said to them, “you could wire in to the dash to give him access to some of the controls?” Scud, how much better would we all fly if we had a kitsen copilot?

Though between him and Doomslug, the cockpit was getting a little crowded. Not to mention the entity stuffed into my soul, and the other spying on me as a “ghost.” But if there was one thing I’d learned over my time as a fighter, a little help went a long way.

The kitsen were able to get something rigged very quickly. It wouldn’t give Hesho all the controls I’d have liked him to have—it would be scudding awesome if someone could take command of the whole ship if I

got shot or passed out from g-forces—but it would do for now. And as he settled into his little seat, I realized something.

Kimmalyn was right. Transitions were hard. Navigating this would be tough. But at least I had a home to come back to, and friends who still wanted me. This was what I'd been fighting for all along. And maybe... maybe there was a place for me here. Or at least room to cut out a place where I could fit.

Arturo was flightleader now, and FM had moved into administration with Jorgen. She flew on occasion, but wouldn't be joining us today. So I waited until Arturo ordered us out of the hangar to do roll call. I followed orders, happy to have someone else in charge. Minutes later, Jorgen fed the coordinates into my brain—given to him by Cuna.

The flight locked on to me, using light-lances to connect us together so we could hyperjump as one entity. I reached into the nowhere and sent us halfway across the galaxy to the Superiority's information nexus, hidden in a location that, as far as the rest of the Superiority knew, didn't exist. A place kept off the maps. A place not talked about.

Around a star known as Sol.

In the system where humankind had originated.

## 6

**W**e came in low around a planetoid that my mission briefing had called Luna. Old Earth's moon.

I couldn't make out much by starlight, but the place reminded me of Detritus. A vast dark planetoid, surface broken by craters. Forlorn. Abandoned by time, and with no defensive shell to hide and protect it. Old Earth had vanished centuries ago, leaving this moon in a lonely orbit around Sol.

Our enemy had built their base here. Cuna said it was because this region was already quarantined, kept off maps, with no travel in or out except for military reasons. So, we humans came home—in a way—for this mission. Only at the same time we didn't. Because Old Earth wasn't here, and nobody knew where it had gone.

That was a mystery for another day, however. Today I had a secret facility to raid. Our plan was straightforward. In roughly ten minutes, we would come into range of the base's sensors. Soon after, we'd reach the base itself.

The place would have an inhibitor—a slug with powers preventing us from using cytonics. Fortunately, Cuna had visited this installation several times, and knew where the inhibitor was. Whenever a high official visited a Superiority base, one of their jobs was to check that protocol was being followed for protecting sensitive equipment—namely cytonic equipment. Very, *very* few people in the Superiority even knew that taynix slugs were the source of these powers.

Cuna had given us the location: a small bunker marked on my map, at the edge of the installation. We would destroy that as quickly as possible. Once the inhibitor was down, we could set up our own. Nedd was in charge of that, with his wingmate Arturo protecting him. The two would also be defended by Sadie and a kitsen battleship—not much larger than my fighter, but laden with ten times the firepower.

We had very few inhibitor slugs, unfortunately, and had brought only two on this mission. One was with Nedd. The backup was on the kitsen ship.

Once our inhibitor was in place, it would block the enemy from calling for help—and would prevent them from receiving immediate backup, even if a call went out before we got our inhibitor up. We'd be free to fully engage any enemy fighters, and we could send for our own backup if we needed it. Everything in these battles depended on cytonics and slugs. Those who could teleport freely would almost certainly win, while those who couldn't would be in trouble.

Once we had control of the region, we'd send a strike force into a specific building: a tall structure marked on my map. Cuna said it held the data storage. Our strike force would recover the information, then we'd all hyperjump away.

I went over these steps in my mind as we soared across the surface of Luna. As a child, I'd listened to Gran-Gran describe the moon in so many different ways: As a knowing companion, always watching from the sky. As a brilliant silvery drop of metal. As a herald of the changing days, mysteriously linked to the woman's body in particular.

Then in school, I'd seen slides of it from the remnants of our archives. Just a desolate chunk of rock. I'd had trouble reconciling the beautiful, friendly, mysterious body of the stories with...well, this hunk of stone. Why had the ancient humans described it with such poetry?

They'd been lonely, I'd decided. Lonely in the universe, unaware of the many other species out there. Lonely in relation to the sky, so uncomfortably open and empty.

“Five minutes until you arrive,” Cuna said over the comm as we swept in along the surface of the moon. “Remember to send the code I gave you. I hope you enjoy this reunion with what was once a very important location in human lore.”

I glanced out the canopy, watching the surface pass as we emerged into the light of the nearby sun. Though we buzzed in frightfully close to the surface, the miniscule atmosphere meant our passing barely disturbed the dust.

“What of... Old Earth?” Nedd asked. “Isn’t there *any* sign of it at all?”

“None,” Cuna said. “The Earth Disappearance Station was initially set up here to study what might have happened to the planet. But even the best scientists—working with licensed, and very rare, Superiority cytonics—could find no trace of it. Your homeworld is well and truly gone.”

They’d given us an explanation earlier, filling in gaps in our records from Detritus. At some point during the final human war, the united forces of the galaxy—forged into a cohesive government to resist the human menace—had launched an all-out attack on Earth. When they’d arrived, they’d found only empty space. And an abandoned moon, cast away like a piece of debris blown off a fleeing battleship.

Even with that explanation, I felt as if I would find Old Earth peeking above the horizon. Waiting there, a blue ball of legend and myth, cradle of life and stories. My ship’s system even had a phantom circle on the proximity monitor to display where it *would* have been. Nothing. Black, empty space. Earth had passed into the legends it had spawned.

*Perhaps, M-Bot said in my mind, it’s a ghost. Like me!*

*You’re joking, but you could be kind of right, I thought back at him. Detritus proves that entire planets can move using cytonics. Maybe Earth teleported away to avoid invasion?*

But if Earth *had* moved to a safe location, why had the humans on it never emerged? Were they in hiding?

“Eyes up,” Arturo said to us over the line. “Installation should be visible any moment now.”

We had brought only thirteen ships. Skyward Flight, Vanir Flight, and one kitsen battleship. All under Arturo's command. That was a fraction of our forces—but the more we brought, the more likely the enemy would be to spot us. In a war where both sides could supply reinforcements in the blink of an eye, stealth trumped numbers. Once we had inhibitor dominance, we could bring in as much of our fleet as we wanted.

Exactly when Cuna had said they would, the enemy sent an authentication request via hypercomm. My cytonic senses picked it up right before Hesho—using some newer technology acquired during my absence—noticed it on the comms. I almost responded, bypassing the equipment. Instead I left it to Arturo, who sent Cuna's code in reply. We were hoping that it would buy us a few minutes—assuming Winzik had forgotten to get Cuna's authorization codes changed since we'd rescued them.

Moments later, we came upon the installation. My cytonic senses immediately winked off—and I felt blinded. We'd hit their inhibitor field. Chet trembled and seemed to grow smaller—though delvers weren't stopped by inhibitors, they could feel them, and didn't like the sensation. M-Bot, who had been humming to himself, vanished.

A single slug, enhanced with some technology, could provide a fairly large bubble of protection—kilometers across. That was big, at least on the scale of one person or a base like this. When flying out in space, kilometers could pass incredibly quickly.

Still, I felt exposed, trapped. To distract myself, I focused on the base itself. Simply referred to as the EDS, the station had been built in the ruins of New Beijing, which had fallen quickly after Earth had disappeared. All humans had long since been removed from the facility. Element-specific gravity gave the base, which was settled into a large crater, a bubble of pressurized air. That, together with radiation skimmers, made the location livable.

Even knowing that, I was shocked to see greenery around the city. Trees were an incongruous sight around the perimeter, just inside the bubble. But of course biological methods of oxygen recycling would be planted, if only as a backup if the mechanical scrubbers went down.



What lay beyond the trees was even more unnerving. The structures inside the bubble were dotted with lights, and while the place wasn't packed with buildings like Starsight had been, the roads were still busy. It had parks. Restaurants. Apartments.

*Scud.* I'd imagined some secret military base, squat like a beetle huddled against the stone. Not a sprawling city.

"Shot off," Kimmalyn said, firing her sniping destructor precisely. A flare went up inside the city. "That should have been their inhibitor."

I tried hard not to think about the cost of that shot, but I did know FM and Jorgen had argued long and hard about the necessity of it. He had made good arguments: That in war, you couldn't worry that the battleship you brought down had a janitorial and medical staff on it. That you couldn't worry if the enemy trying to kill you had been pressed to fight against their will, as had been done to many, many soldiers throughout history. You just had to survive.

Once I'd have agreed with him. But now I heard FM's vigorous objections in the back of my mind. Was there another way? There *should* have been another way, right? Still, with the fall of that small bunker, my senses returned. M-Bot's humming resumed—as if he hadn't even noticed. Chet stretched, and I felt my anxiety decrease.

Nedd, Arturo, and the kitsen ship—named the *Iron Fortress*—soared ahead of us.

"Hey, Hesho," I said, "is *Iron Fortress* the full name of the kitsen ship? Or is it actually the *Iron Fortress of Poetic Words Said after a Held Breath* or something?" When I'd flown with Hesho before, his ship had been named something beautiful. I found this one surprisingly mundane.

"Just *Iron Fortress*," he said, with a smile. "The captain gets to name the ship. You will find many kitsen who like names as I do, but there are some who prefer simple clarity." He paused. "I will miss naming opportunities a great deal. It was one of my previous duties. We shall see if my traditions last. Though I am not alone in my love for poetry, I am... among the more obtuse in that regard."

I'd always had a sense that Hesho was a little odd, not just because of the emperor thing. We all watched, tense, as Nedd and the *Iron Fortress* flew into position—hovering above the base—and activated their own inhibitors. Our tech wasn't as good as the Superiority's, but we still managed to get a field up that covered the entire city. Hopefully it would at least slow down any reinforcements.

The rest of us streaked forward, and I got more visuals on the place. So ordinary. So full of life. "Anyone else uncomfortable about this?" I asked over the line.

"Yeah," Arturo said. "Admiral, you seeing these visuals?"

"What's wrong?" Jorgen asked from base. "I'm looking at what you're sending, but I'm not reading anything odd. Are there defenses I'm not spotting?"

"It's not the defenses," I said, "but the lack of them. Jorgen, we're raiding a city."

"City," Doomslug fluted softly.

The lights on my dash flickered.

"Direct, private call from him," Hesho said. "Patching you through."

"Spin," Jorgen said in my helmet a moment later. He could have spoken directly into my head, but we were trying to get into the habit of using communication slugs, as it worked better for everyone else. "You need to see this through."

Ahead of us, a local defense force had started scrambling. A few enemy fighters were rising into the air. Not many. Scud, they barely had anything. "Jorgen, those look like *police* ships, not true military vessels."

"They will try to kill you either way," he said. "Listen, this is a *secret military base*. They are guarding military assets of an incredibly valuable nature."

"But...Jorgen, there are *families* down there."

"Unfortunately," he said, "this kind of operation needs to be extremely tightly controlled. You want people committed to long-term service, since every person you transfer out is another one who can potentially leak the location. So you build a city out of it. Let everyone settle down."

“And we’re going to attack them,” I said softly.

“No, we’re going to raid their information storage,” Jorgen said. “Spin, I’m sorry. But this is what battle is like. What happened to the bloodthirsty warrior? I’m sure Alexander the Great wouldn’t have had second thoughts about a raid like this.”

“Alexander the Great was a monster,” I said. “Most of them were, Jorgen, even if the stories dodge the issue. I...”

I’d lived among these people now. I couldn’t see things as I once had. Still, I trailed off. My friends and I were fighting for survival against a much more powerful force, led by people who were decidedly evil. Did I think I was going to be able to go to *war* without causing casualties?

It was just...this was the first time I’d gone into a true battle against the Superiority since living on Starsight. How many of the pilots I was about to kill were like Morriumur? Good, decent people in the wrong place? How many people down there just wanted to live? Scud, first the slug, now this? Could I live with every stray shot I fired potentially blasting through an apartment window and vaporizing civilians?

I didn’t have much choice, because the enemy ships were upon us. Fewer than twenty in all; enough to be dangerous, but not the swarm we’d feared. They had obviously intended this base’s clandestine nature to protect it.

“Our cytonic inhibitor is working,” Nedd said over the comm. “Lucky here is doing her job beautifully.”

He and the kitsen ship would remain on the defensive, keeping the inhibitor field up. Arturo and Sadie would protect them. Hopefully we had put that inhibitor up fast enough to prevent the enemy from even calling for help.

The ships that engaged us were at least competent. Working in formations, trying to chase us into losing our wingmates, guarding the way forward to prevent us from flying together into the center of the city. I immediately pulled to the right, away from the barrage of oncoming destructor fire, and swept the perimeter of the bubble.

Kimmalyn followed, as capable a wingmate as I'd ever had. We buzzed past a set of gun emplacements—huge anti-aircraft guns that were pointed toward the sky. Those would have decimated any larger ships that had gotten close, but were too long-ranged to bother us. One of the reasons we'd come in low and from the side was to stay under them. I could imagine the frustration of the people inside, watching their city be attacked, unable to do anything.

"All right, everyone," Arturo said. "Skyward Flight, engage those fighters and keep them busy. Vanir Flight, you're incursion. Get close to the installation, scout it visually, then have your slugs hyperjump your marines inside."

Vanir was a small flight, just four Sportas: four-seater fighters, each carrying a team of marines. Not quite carrier ships, intended for fast maneuverability and combat, they could drop off three ground troops when needed. Today they'd send their ground forces in to steal the information we wanted. The rest of us just had to keep the fighters busy. Fortunately, the little fighters we were facing were very unlikely to have slugs of their own, so even if one got beyond our inhibitor field, they wouldn't be able to call for help.

"Watch your right," Hesho noted, and I dodged by instinct, avoiding a trail of destructor fire.

"Want to try a Hatch maneuver?" Kimmalyn said, banking alongside me. That was a ploy where I would go into a frantic set of dodges to convince the enemy ships I was panicking.

"Not yet," I said. "Let's give them a chase first, so we can see how good they are."

"Roger that, Spin," Kimmalyn said.

I went into a set of evasives: the challenging, flowery type. Kimmalyn and I spun and looped, broke apart and curved back together, soared upward and sideways—dodging the fire from behind with poise. These pilots behind us were good. And the ships had actual people in the cockpits, rather than being piloted remotely. That was rare for the Superiority. Only their best fought in person.

That said, I'd faced delvers throwing hundreds of ships at me at once. Compared to that, these...well, they weren't much of a challenge. I stuck to the outside of the bubble of air, keeping a full six of the ships busy. Kimmalyn kept up with me, and together we didn't take a single hit to our shields.

"Spin," Jorgen said over the line, "what are you doing?"

"Dealing with more than my share of fighters," I said, pulling into a dive. "Anyone else and their wingmate handling six at once?"

"You haven't fired a single shot," Jorgen noted.

"I don't need to."

He fell silent. "Understood," he said.

I watched the proximity monitor as I flew, and Hesho helpfully highlighted the incursion team. They'd pushed inward, toward the center of the city. There they buzzed a specific skyscraper with shiny black windows: the place Cuna indicated was the information storage facility. Inside we could find all kinds of useful data, including the locations of the mining stations where the enemy got their acclivity stone.

Some among the military were still suspicious of Cuna—worrying they were a plant. I didn't have those concerns. Winzik had legitimately tried to kill Cuna—who, in turn, had already offered information and aid that would have been incredibly stupid to release if they were a spy.

As the incursion team finished their sweep of the data storage building, a dozen more of our ships arrived as reinforcements. The enemy fighters were good, but now they were severely outgunned—and my team included the best pilots in the galaxy. Enemy ships started going up in flowers of flame, but so far we'd only lost one fighter: Catnip, who, according to Hesho's monitor, had hyperjumped with his slug to safety.

I should have known it was too good to last. "Scud," Breakaway said over the comm. She was leading Vanir Flight, and therefore the incursion force. "Admiral, there's a shield on this building, as we expected. But there's also a *second* inhibitor field here, covering just this structure."

"What?" Cuna said. "That...that's...I'm sorry. It must have been set up after my previous visit."

“Scud,” Jorgen said in my ear. The *Iron Fortress* had sophisticated scanning equipment, and would be sending up-to-the-second scans of the region and the fighters back to headquarters. “That’s a wrinkle. Breakaway, can you... Wait, what’s that?”

I scanned the battlefield, flying by instinct, looking for whatever he’d noticed. All through the city, rooftops were opening, and guns were rising from them. AA guns. Smaller, shorter ranged, designed to hit starfighters. They had waited to deploy them until our team got close to the city center, where they’d be surrounded.

“Defensive maneuvers!” Arturo said. “All ships!”

Vanir Flight immediately scattered as the guns started unloading on them. I held my breath, but the shots mostly missed. We lost one Vanir ship, and I waited for confirmation the crew had been hyperjumped to safety in time.

Yellow light on the comm. Some casualties from that explosion—we’d lost at least one of the four on the ship. Scud! Still, the others dodged successfully. A modern ship with a good pilot was more maneuverable than a turret. Unfortunately, this threw a huge wrinkle into the plan. How would we break into the base if we had to be on the defensive the whole time?

“Spin,” Kimmalyn said, “that looks bad.”

As she said it, the ships tailing us got off a lucky shot on me—the destructor fire rippling across the surface of my shield, briefly illuminating the shell that protected my ship.

“Shield at sixty-five percent,” Hesho warned. “That was a solid hit.”

I nodded. The city didn’t have its own shield, though several of the more important buildings clearly had individual ones. Better to protect the most vital areas with high-powered shields than to have a single larger, thin one, easily breakable.

I focused on my evasion, pushing into a dive. Kimmalyn and I spun around one another, bright destructor blasts raining past us like burning meteorites. Sprays of them hit the city below, blooms of fire rising along a street, as flying cars exploded while fleeing the firefight.

Scud. Were my opponents that ruthless? That uncaring of the noncombatants the stray fire was killing?

No. No, I knew better. I imagined the anguish they felt being forced to defend their city, knowing each shot might kill people they knew, people they loved. The enemy pilots were doing their jobs. And sometimes the job sucked.

“Spin...” Kimmalyn said as we pulled into a loop over the city.

“All right, everyone,” Arturo said, his voice tense. “We’ll get picked off if we keep this up. Swing back in a Stewart formation, planning to angle straight toward the target. First squad, on mark 118. Squad two, follow. Nedd, you—”

Nedd’s ship went up in a burst of fire. Gone in a second, the powerful AA guns blasting straight through his shield.

“Scud!” Arturo screamed. “Nedd!”

In that moment, all of the enemy ships—even those tailing me—turned and swarmed the kitsen ship, *Iron Fortress*.

“Protect the kitsen ship!” Jorgen said over the line. “All pilots!”

It was too late. A dozen shots hit the kitsen ship, and as its shield went down, it hyperjumped away.

“Jorgen,” Arturo said, “Nedd—”

“Stay focused,” Jorgen said. “Medical will send information when they have it. Go, everyone!”

We obeyed, following Arturo’s commands. I couldn’t help but watch my dash. My heart wrenched, my insides twisting. Then a yellow light came on next to Nedd’s name.

At least one casualty. Either Nedd, or his slug, was gone.

“Stay sharp!” Jorgen shouted. “Our inhibitors are both down. The enemy will send for help. No time to delay.”

I reached the top of my loop and started another dive. A brilliant dazzling blast from the AA guns nearly took out Arturo, who was forced to hyperjump away, his shield down. Everyone else was scattering. Jorgen sent reinforcements—I saw another flight appearing on the monitors.

“Prepare to abandon mission,” Jorgen said.

“Spin,” Kimmalyyn said. “Please.”

Everything started to shake, my cockpit vibrating as my soul trembled. I snapped my eyes open, pulled out of my dive, and screamed. Angry at the enemy, at my own frailty, at Winzik for forcing my hand.

Angry at the universe. For having no answers.

I moved my finger onto the trigger of my destructors and, hating everything about this, took aim at the first enemy I saw and started firing.



# 7

They dodged.

But I felt them do it.

My time in the nowhere had changed me, given me the ability to reach out and communicate. I'd reached *into the past* in special circumstances. So it was easy to push through defenses and into minds, and I *felt* the person in that ship ahead of me. A dione with a family, thinking about their three children as they realized I was on their tail. I felt them plan a feint to the side, then a turn to try to lead me left in a dive, straight into the line of AA fire.

My expanding powers were so wondrous and amazing. Which made it extra horrifying to see how callously my instincts—aware of the enemy's movements; Sun Tzu would have approved—traced the enemy's upcoming path perfectly. They ran into each of my shots as they tried to dodge.

Their mind winked out. Like a communication line suddenly cut. The beautiful things I'd learned became, in my terrible hands, just another way to kill.

My soul still vibrating, my mind alight with anger and fire, I hit my overburn and kept on killing. I sliced through the battlefield like a razor blade across a throat. Enemy ships went up in blasts of light as I cut in behind them, offering no sporting chance. This wasn't sport. This was a cauterization. This was cutting off the hand before the body could die.

I brought down six in the next few minutes. All of the AA guns, reasonably, started firing on me. I swept low through the city, shattering windows with my passing, putting obstacles between me and the guns.

*Spensa*, M-Bot said softly, *I feel you*.

I gritted my teeth as my systems highlighted the firing positions of each of the AA guns. I swung up along an apartment building, intending to crest the top and unleash some shots at those emplacements—but in my agony, my soul *freaked out*. I could feel Chet in there, feel him in pain, an agony that mirrored my own.

Chunks of the building next to me began to vanish. Then—as I darted out over the top—they began to appear in the air between me and the guns, intercepting the barrage of shots that tried to trace my ship. Chunks of steel appeared above the emplacements themselves, crashing down and smashing them one after another—causing explosions that rocked the entire city, debris spraying high into the air. Trailing smoke, spiraling toward the void.

The few remaining enemy ships arrayed to try to stop me. I mopped them up almost unconsciously, shooting down three and then smashing the last two out of the sky with chunks of steel the size of hovercars.

The battlefield fell still. Almost a third of the city was on fire, smoke bleeding from wounds where the AA guns had gone up. The last pieces of the defending ships rained down as sparks, sprinkling the city like molten rain.

The line stayed quiet as I clutched my control sphere and throttle in sweaty hands, my cockpit vibrating, random objects—a cup, a pair of glasses, a child’s stuffed toy—appearing in the air beside me, then dropping to hit my chair or arms. Sweat streamed from my forehead, and I couldn’t blink, couldn’t move. Other than to tremble.

“Sweetest stars,” Kimmalyn whispered over the comm, “and the Lord God that birthed them...”

Jorgen cleared his throat. “Belay the retreat. Enemy defensive position eliminated. Nice work, Spin.”

*Shut up*, I started to whisper, but bit it off. I was the one who always bragged about killing, about the way of the warrior. All of that nonsense.

Hesho muted the comm. “Take your time,” he said softly. “Breathe. In and out. Focus only on each new breath.”

I nodded, doing as he suggested, and forced myself back under control. My cockpit stopped vibrating.

“Nedd,” I said.

Hesho turned on the comm, putting a direct call in to Jorgen. “Admiral, we would like to know the situation of callsign: Nedder. If it is known.”

“He arrived, burned and unconscious,” Jorgen said. “No sign of his slugs. We think Lucky died in the initial shot that hit the ship, and Chubs sent him back. But...didn’t come himself.”

I got an image in my head from Doomslug, fluting quietly from her sling. Pain. Chubs had been wounded. Sending Nedd had been his final act.

I closed my eyes, feeling Doomslug’s pain as my own.

“He should survive,” Jorgen said. “But...well, he’ll probably never fly again. Not with only one arm. I’m sorry.”

“It’s war,” I whispered, hoarse. “And we’re soldiers.”

“Nevertheless,” Jorgen said, “let’s pull you out to rest. Arturo is ready to come back in and the team can—”

“No,” I said. “I’ll see it through.”

He didn’t contradict me, so I took a deep breath and pointedly didn’t look at the large sections of the city I’d destroyed. “Incursion squad on me,” I said. “Kimmalyn, our target building is still shielded. Get it down. Skyward Flight, provide air support and be ready to pull us out if something goes wrong.”

I got a handful of “affirmative” replies, and not a one called me out on taking command in Arturo’s absence. Technically T-Stall was next in line, but I wasn’t in a mood to pay attention to the chain of command. Honestly, I hadn’t *ever* been good at it, even when I *hadn’t* been a one-woman apocalypse with a fruit-flavored delver filling.

Kimmalyn’s ship was equipped with a shield cutter. She led the way to the large black skyscraper at the center of the EDS. She hovered there, rotating her ship with the acclivity ring unhinging, so she could position the bottom of her ship as close as possible to the building. Her vessel let out a bright blue blast, reminiscent of an IMP—but far more concentrated.

That knocked out the building's shield. I did a long, slow pass along the tower. Starting at the top, flying down in a spiral around the outside, centimeters from the wall. Yes, I could feel what had been reported earlier: this building had a second inhibitor, secret and unexpected. I wondered if I could get a sense of where the thing was, based on the field it projected. Only, with mechanical augmentation, the fields an inhibitor slug made could be various shapes. So...

*Floor thirty-seven, Chet said. Directly in the center of the building. I can cut through the inhibitor and see it hiding there.*

"Kimmalyn," I said, "I need a hole in the wall on the thirty-seventh floor. Incursion team, prepare to breach there. We're going to find the inhibitor. My senses tell me it's at the direct center of that floor."

"Roger," Kimmalyn said, using her specialized destructor to cut a hole in the wall. The chunk of stone and steel from the wall fell free, edges glowing with heat.

I flew my ship over and hit the cockpit release. "Hesho, if something goes wrong, how confident are you in flying this ship?"

"With the minimal controls I have?" he asked. "Not terribly confident. But I shall endeavor to do my best in the event of a disaster."

Good enough. As I twisted to undo the quick-release on my buckles, Doomslug fluted and appeared on my lap—jumping out of her sling.

"You sure?" I asked her. "We can't get out until we bring down the inhibitor inside."

She fluted in the affirmative, so I scooped her up as I climbed out. She went into a holster on my hip, slung across my opposite shoulder. The others called them slings, but that felt...I don't know. Like the thing a mom would use to bring her baby along. Unnerved—even a little nauseated—by my powers as I was, I still wasn't going to bring a *baby sling* into battle. I was bringing a *slug holster*.

I unclipped a fully automatic assault rifle from its place at the side of the cockpit, and the three remaining ships from Vanir Flight joined me, each carrying three members of our newly christened marine corps. We'd never had much in the way of ground forces, but were rectifying that in the face

of the increasing need for assaults like this. Nedd in particular had enjoyed finally being given time on the firing range for...

No. Don't think about Nedd.

Wolf was the leader of the marine force, and as Junker opened his canopy for her, she stood up and waved to me. Wolf was a tall, hard-faced woman with body armor and one lock of blue hair. Her non-code name was Chono, which was apparently Mongolian. When I'd asked if she was related to the Great Khan, she'd simply said, "Of course."

I'd tried not to gush *too* much. It had been difficult.

She and I shared a nod, then leaped off the fronts of our hovering ships into the hole, our guns up. This city had artificial gravity, fortunately, and so we didn't have trouble walking or moving. We activated flashlights on the front of our muzzles as the other eight marines followed quietly, each of them with their own slug holster.

Unfortunately, I'd just entered a deeper darkness than the physical kind. Because my cytonic senses once again vanished—smothered by the blanket of the inhibitor field.

"I have the description of the building that Cuna provided," Hesho said through my helmet speaker, "and I am coordinating with command. We are trying to guess the direction you need to go to reach the inhibitor. If that would be of assistance."

"That would be scudding wonderful," I whispered back.

A square box appeared in the corner of my helmet's visor. A red dot indicated I was at the perimeter, and a blinking dot in the center highlighted our target. It didn't have any of the internal features of the floor, but it was helpful in getting me where I needed to go.

There were some locked doors in the way, but that was why the Saints had made destructors. As soon as we knocked out the first, though, return fire came blasting from the darkness—forcing us back and to the sides.

"Sadie, Kimmaly, I said, "we're pinned down. You have our locations?"

"Sure do," Sadie said.

"Kindly make us a path."

Kimmalyn cut another hole in the wall and Sadie filled it with destructor fire, pointed inward. Ship weapons were of an entirely different category than the handheld ones we had, and in moments the shots wound down and we were able to pick through the remnants of the wall and continue forward. Muzzle flashlights lit the remaining pieces of our enemies, something that—as a starfighter pilot—I didn’t often have to confront.

*They prop up an evil dictatorship, I reminded myself. This is part of the same force that murdered my father.*

I knew the weakness in that reasoning, but it was enough to keep me focused as—after a brief shootout with the last remaining enemy squad—we reached the location of Hesho’s blinking light. I found the box, well locked and disguised as a storage container among many other similar ones. When I popped it open, I found a terrified blue-and-green slug inside.

Doomslug fluted, and the other one stretched out a little, sniffing toward the air.

“That’s right,” I said, scooping her up. “We’re friends.”

Doomslug fluted again, then—brilliantly—awareness returned to me. Doomslug and the rescued slug vanished.

“Wolf,” I said, “inhibitor field is down. This is your mission now.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Data storage is on floor thirty-six. Cuna doesn’t know where; she took an elevator up, and says she got a little turned around.”

I nodded, not correcting Wolf on the use of “she” for a dione. Together the marines had a quick conference, then one placed some explosives on the floor. We took cover, and they blasted it open.

I hyperjumped down, then waited as the marines rappelled through the hole. While they worked, I reached out with my senses.

*There are six enemies approaching, I sent to Wolf, implanting the words in her mind.*

She jumped, then looked at me and nodded.

*They’ve stopped, I sent, pointing through the darkness—lit by some fires on the ceiling—toward a hallway. Down this hall. Probably setting up*

*an ambush.*

She tossed a grenade at the wall, bouncing it toward the people farther down. We went in after the explosion, eliminating the soldiers with callous precision, muzzles flaring and destructors lighting the smoke. I blocked the thoughts and emotions of the dying from my mind.

It didn't take much effort to locate the data storage. We simply moved in a search pattern until we found a metal door, reinforced and protected, with a lot of people on the other side. I picked up some of their emotions. Nervousness. Waiting for help. Scientists. Yeah, this was the place.

*Some twenty people working inside, I sent to Wolf. No way to tell how many are civilians. You willing to do this in a way that keeps us from firing on anyone we don't need to?*

She looked to me, then nodded.

*Take a deep breath, I sent her. Have your slug ready to get you out if this goes wrong.*

Then I hyperjumped the two of us into the room, near one of the minds I could feel—but back behind the rest of them. We immediately raised guns, ignoring the scientists and technicians. Each of us fired twice, drilling through the skulls of the soldiers waiting by the doors, their backs to us.

Scud, I'd never felt so sick to fire a weapon. Was this what I'd signed up for? Fighting the Krell, an unknowable evil force, felt so far removed from what we were doing here. Now...now *we* were the unknowable force. I was the thing that terrorized these people, possessing powers and abilities they didn't understand.

We gathered the scientists at the rear of the room, their hands up and trembling. Wolf watched them while I opened the door from the inside, letting the rest of the team in. A few seconds later, Rig and a crew of technicians appeared in the room, sent by Jorgen—he didn't have much hyperjumping ability, but could persuade the slugs mind-to-mind to do it, if he knew where to tell them to go.

Rig's team quickly began working on the data storages, grabbing a copy of basically every sensitive and secret piece of information the Superiority

owned. All the things that M-Bot and I had wanted to discover on Starsight, but had been locked out of.

As Rig worked on the data, I patrolled the front of the room, near the engineers' stations. On several of the screens, a familiar varvax stood in front of an official seal. Winzik had a deep green carapace, bipedal and hulking, like a suit of armor to protect the far more fragile crablike being who rode inside. I could see him through the helmet's faceplate, floating in a liquid solution.

I gestured to one of Rig's engineers, and the woman helpfully hit a few buttons, rewinding the message and playing it from the beginning. I kept my cytonic senses alert for anyone approaching, then leaned down and let my translator pin feed me Winzik's words.

"My goodly people of the Superiority's multitudinous worlds. I am Provisional High General Winzik, as many of you know. It is my burden and regret that I have been forced into the position of temporary commander of the Superiority during this time of grave danger.

"Understand that I take this duty as the most solemn of responsibilities. Those of us of prime intelligence bear a heavy charge—that of protecting and nurturing those who have not yet achieved equivalent status. My words today are thus for the weaker of our wonderful species.

"Your natural inclination might be toward panic, anger, or even violence! My, my. How *terrible* it must be to live with secondary intelligence. You must resist these shocking emotions. The Superiority is strong, and those of us who lead it *will* protect you from the human scourge. As the galaxy has survived their horrific attacks in the past, so we will weather them this time.

"Already we have the outbreak partially contained, and the fighting is limited to the outskirts of the Superiority. It might take decades to properly bring the humans down, but I am determined to do the job asked of me. For now, know that there is absolutely no danger to you. It is the duty of those of us who have achieved primary intelligence to fight on your behalf, so you do not have to risk the dangers of aggression and rage. Live your lives as usual, knowing I will protect you."



On one hand, I was impressed. Winzik could likely milk this for decades, pretending that—even long after we'd been defeated—he needed this power to protect everyone from the terrifying humans. On the other hand, if Winzik *actually* thought he could contain me, then he would soon find out firsthand how wrong he was.

On the screen, the message started repeating—and rather than hear it again, I shot the monitor a few times. When the others looked at me in shock, I gave them a shrug.

*I'm sorry, M-Bot said in my head, perhaps sensing my frustration at the situation. For what you had to do today.*

"It's my job," I whispered to him, watching the door, my gun at the ready.

*It's not what you dreamed.*

"I gave up that dream in the nowhere," I said to him. "I could have stayed there, fighting battles without consequences. I came back. Because things like this have to happen."

*Do they?*

"For now," I said. "The goal is to stop them from being necessary. Somehow." That was the difference. It *had* to be. Winzik was intent on domination, destruction, and even extermination. We fought for something better.

I knew the same justification had been used by virtually every terrorist force in the past. I wasn't naive. But I also wasn't so cynical, or so foolish, as to paint them all as equivalent. A woman had to follow her conscience. I believed in what we were doing.

It still felt terrible.

I glanced to Rig. "I think we can pull all of this out," he whispered to me. "Why copy when we can just take?" He grinned, then pointed to several slugs they'd set up.

Cool. He hyperjumped out with his team—taking multiple large data storages with them. Servers and all.

Seconds later, my strike force—all of us back in our ships—hyperjumped away after him. And to those we'd left alive, I knew we'd be

just as mysterious and terrible as the Krell had been to me.

## 8

**A**s we landed back in the hangar, there was something different about the air of victory this time. I remembered well—like the memory of a lost loved one—returning from saving us from the lifebuster bomb. I remembered celebrations, cheers, toasts—the enthusiasm unchecked for an unexpected victory.

Today, pilots climbed tiredly from their ships. Perhaps it was our casualties—two dead from Vanir Flight, two taynix lost, Nedd severely wounded. But almost every action cost us lives; it was part of the metric of maintaining a fighting force. Another damper was the knowledge that this wasn't a definitive win—this was one step toward victory, but only the first of many.

Then, of course, there was what I'd done.

You were supposed to have to *touch* things to hyperjump them. You were limited to complete objects, not chunks of them. Large structures, like battleships, usually required specialized architecture built into them to make hyperjumping the entire thing possible for the cytonic.

I'd violated *all* of those supposed rules. Just like the delvers did.

As I climbed down from my ship, it seemed that those in the room shied back from me. And why shouldn't they? I was more weapon than human. Even a few members of Skyward Flight—Sadie, notably—watched me with unbridled awe.

*Something's wrong*, M-Bot said in my head.

"Yeah," I muttered. "I—"

*Not with you. With me. The delvers have spotted me. I need to hide again.*

“I still don’t understand how you do that,” I said. “Aren’t you all in the exact same point in space?”

*Yes and no. There’s no space here. So there are no points. No reality at all. It’s trippy. But they can sense my connection to you. I need to turn inward and vanish. That or pretend to be one of them. Which might work better.*

“Can you do that?”

*Spensa, I’m super sneaky. It’s what I was built for, remember?*

“You always say that, but—”

*Gotta hide now. Haunt yourself for a while. I’ll let you know when I’m free.*

I felt him withdrawing. Leaving me alone.

Chet gave me a sense of warmth though. I appreciated that. Not alone, just lonely.

I started into the hangar, wanting rest, and bade Hesho farewell, suggesting he get something to eat. He flew off, and I probably should have gone to check on Nedd. Sadie and T-Stall were going to do that now, judging by their conversation. But I wasn’t certain I could stomach it; from what Jorgen had said, Nedd was still unconscious, in stable—but seriously injured—condition.

I’d had the power, at any moment, to win that battle all on my own. If I’d done so a few minutes earlier, Nedd wouldn’t have been hurt. Could I ever meet his eyes after that?

I walked quickly toward the exit, intending to go to my rooms and crash, but Kimmalyln fell in beside me.

“You want to talk?” she asked.

“No,” I lied.

She nodded and didn’t push. Why had I said no? I silently cursed her for being a good friend, and respecting my boundaries, as she split off to go join T-Stall and Sadie.

At the hangar door I ran into Jorgen, who was walking holding a datapad and looking distracted.

“We’ve got it,” he told me. “There are *five* mining operations. One more than you heard, but still...Scud. Only five! It’s a weakness, Spin. An unguarded crack in the fortress wall. We *can* exploit this.”

“Just as long as we only attack the supply depots on this side,” I said. “At least one of the mining operations on the other side has friends of mine living in it.”

He nodded in agreement.

“Jorgen,” I said. “About what I did back there...”

He looked at me, then gave me an encouraging smile, setting aside the datapad and taking me by both arms. “You were *amazing*,” he said. “I know I was skeptical when you said you needed to stay in the nowhere and learn what you could there, but I’m glad you convinced me. You should see how enthusiastic our allies are about the results of this operation. For the first time, everyone believes we might actually be able to *do* this. Resist the Superiority and *win*.”

“All it took was getting your own personal delver girlfriend...” I said.

He paused, so I gave him a grin, trying to convince him it was a joke. I put a tight clamp on my emotions. I didn’t want him to see how much I hurt.

He hesitated—noting the full flight deck behind me. Then, obviously making a deliberate decision, he leaned down and kissed me.

That felt...wonderful. I knew how awkward it was for him to be dating one of his pilots, as there were protocol issues. But he also knew that I needed him and he needed me. Jorgen choosing *me* instead of *rules* was just about the most important message he could ever send. I felt an elated burst of adrenaline.

And it ran up against a kind of wall inside of me. A wall of worry, of self-loathing.

I started to feel sick. Joy was such an *unforgivable* thing to experience after the killing I’d done today. I wasn’t human any longer—yet here I was, kissing my boyfriend like nothing was wrong?

He pulled back, and damn him, he was too observant for his own good. “I know that you feel different about fighting now,” he said. “I do too. It’s maturity, Spensa, and experience. They’re changing us. It’s all right to feel conflicted. It’s messy...it’s all so very messy.”

I nodded.

“I’m going to do my best to make sure we never get surprised by civilians on a military mission again,” he said. “I won’t send you in unaware again, Spensa. I promise.”

It was a good move, and a perfectly Jorgen one to take. He’d analyze what had gone wrong, would talk with our top military and organizational minds about how to learn from it. How to make certain we didn’t make the same mistake twice. That was why he was in command.

But knowing it wouldn’t likely happen in the future didn’t ease the pain inside me now.

I forced out another smile. “You’re brilliant,” I said, fully honest. “Thank you.”

“We need to plan our next step,” he said. “It should be simple. Winzik is getting acclivity stone from these five locations—all mining stations in the nowhere, attached to supply depots on our side. You say one is mostly shut down already, by the pirates you befriended.

“Fortunately, we don’t have to attack the mining stations themselves, or the civilians there. If we blow up the portals, then Winzik will be robbed of those resources. Using our powers, I’m sure we can find a way to rescue the miners on the other side eventually.”

“A good plan,” I said, truly exhausted now. “And I know some of the Broadsiders would appreciate that. Thank you.”

He nodded. “We need to strike before Winzik has time to figure out why we wanted those databases. I’m thinking a five-pronged attack, hitting each supply depot at the same time. A coordinated hit, leaving him completely flat-footed.”

“Great,” I said, trying to control my trembling. If I started freaking out right now, he’d know.

I *couldn't* let him know how much this hurt. Couldn't let him know that I was breaking inside at the idea of going into battle again. He was finding peace and success in his new role. I had to do the same.

"I'll get everyone else on board," he said, "and talk to the kitsen generals, get their strategic insight. For now, you get some rest. I've already checked on Nedd, and I'll send you an update as soon as he's awake. You need sleep though. Because if everyone agrees on this plan, we'll set the attacks for as early as tomorrow. Time is of the essence."

His excited smile on top of the kiss was the last straw for me. I gave him a sweet grin—scud, I hoped he didn't see me being "sweet" as a terrible sign—and left. Once he was out of sight I sped up my pace, until I reached my quarters and hid inside.

Almost as soon as I was alone, a text appeared on my watch. Tech the UrDail used, which we'd begun to incorporate into our teams as well.

*Dinner?* It was Kimmalyn. I sent her something about needing to rest, then I took a deep breath and surveyed my quarters. I'd been assigned a three-room officer's bunk. I was technically a commodore, for some reason, even though pilots were almost never promoted above captain without moving into administration. Jorgen had pulled some strings to ensure my seniority, emphasizing my special position as a cytonic, and need for autonomous field command. Nonsense equating to: "Nobody knows what to do with you, Spensa, so here's a promotion."

I'd tried to convince Mom and Gran-Gran to move in with me to help fill the space, but hadn't had any luck yet. It *was* a little daunting to have so much room, but I'd been trying to think of it as the equivalent of a warrior's trophy and enjoy it.

Today I found it comforting. I had space, without anyone or anything to pressure me. Of course, I still did my customary check of each room and closet. Ridiculous? Perhaps. It made me feel better to look for assassins—until I remembered that there were kitsen ninjas somewhere out there. They could be hiding in places a human could never fit. Did my routine need to include a thorough check of my sock drawer to make sure no cute furry killers were hiding among my unmentionables?

I settled down on my bed, and let out a deep breath. Inside me Chet was trembling, and it took effort to prevent another attack from coming on. Scud. I could barely control it. Those vibrations. The strange way my powers acted. I—

“Incredible work today,” a woman’s voice said from behind me. “That was really something.”

I spun and leaped off my bed and to my feet. Brade was standing by my bedroom wall, next to my replica Browning FN 1910 handgun.

Brade. Winzik’s pet human cytonic. Short military buzz cut. Sleeveless, tight military fatigues and flak jacket. Assault rifle slung on her back. I had my sidearm out in a heartbeat and put three holes in my wall before I realized she wasn’t there physically. She was a cytonic projection—I’d done something similar to her while in the nowhere.

She looked down the barrel of my sidearm destructor, then nodded. “Good reflexes.”

I ignored her, running to the comm panel and calling operations. “Is our inhibitor field down?” I demanded.

“No?” a confused operator said on the other side. “Detritus’s protections are still in place...”

“Your inhibitor is fine,” Brade said from behind me, amused. “You and I are connected somehow. I don’t understand what’s going on, but I can project to you, Spin. Like you did to me.”

I moved my finger off the button and turned. “Go away.”

“No.”

I threw the weight of my cytonic powers at her. I...didn’t exactly know what I was trying to accomplish, other than to banish her, but she bore the blast of raw mental energy and didn’t so much as stumble. She seemed to have only sent a very faint projection of herself, leaving the rest of her protected. Dismissing her with my considerable powers was a little like trying to kill a mosquito with a cannon.

“Save it for the battlefield,” Brade said, stalking around and inspecting my room. When I’d done this to her, I’d been able to see everything around



her—and hear what anyone near her was saying. If I couldn't find a way to stop this, I presented an enormous security issue to our forces.

“What do you want, Brade?” I demanded.

“I've asked myself that for years, you know?” she said. “Should be easy to answer, and I guess it is.” She stepped up to me. “What do I want? I want to *win*.”

“I gave you a chance to join us,” I said. “You ran to Winzik and turned me in.”

“I stand by my choice, though I can't say I'm sad you escaped. If you hadn't run off, I would never have witnessed the display you managed today.” She shook her head, seeming in awe. “Incredible. Fifteen kills in under ten minutes would be impressive for any other pilot. But what you did to the AA guns...the way you ripped buildings apart and used the chunks in offense and defense...Spensa, you're *incredible*.” She nodded to me. Brade didn't really smile—at least, she did so rarely. “You're worthy. I'm worthy. We should be working together.”

“To do...what exactly?”

She gestured at me, kind of a “what else?” sort of shrug. “Conquest, Spensa. It's in our blood.”

“You're crazy.”

“Crazy,” she said, “like Alexander the Great? Like the ancient pharaohs? Like Attila the Hun, Napoleon, Charlemagne? People who saw the vast expanse of the world and realized the greatest challenge in life would be to rule it all?” She stepped closer to me. “None of them ever stood a real chance. But we do. With the power you showed today, we *absolutely* do.”

“I think I'd rather use that power to squash you,” I snapped. “You betrayed me, Brade.”

“And *you* betrayed the Superiority,” she replied. “I merely tried to turn you in for it. But that's meaningless.” She stepped even closer to me. “Thank you for showing me our potential.”

Then she vanished.

Scud, scud, *scud*. I collapsed into the chair by the wall, huddled up on myself, and couldn't control it any longer. For the next hour, I let things vanish and appear around me, increasingly eclectic and bizarre, as my soul went aflame and my self—what was left of it—hid in the recesses of my mind.

Terrified.

# PART TWO

## 9

**B**y the next morning, I had a handle on myself again. I knew I couldn't continue on as before—so I made a decision.

I was a weapon. I'd started on that path by going to the nowhere, and then by allowing a delver's soul to combine with mine. My purpose was to free my people.

Nothing else mattered. My emotions didn't matter. The damage to my soul and my psyche? Just part of the payment. I could do this. I was a soldier. It was what I'd signed up for. I could survive long enough to bring down the Superiority. Afterward, who cared?

Making this decision was liberating. Not because I was freed from emotions. But, like a surgical strike, this let me control the worst of them. Fear, anxiety, uncertainty. It took them out, leaving me with the manageable ones. Sadness. Regret. Loss.

Those were emotions I knew; they'd been my companions long before I discovered M-Bot and Doomslug.

I rose, enjoyed the luxury of an actual shower—not just a cleanser—and found a note on my schedule from Jorgen, requesting a meeting.

Jorgen. What would I do about Jorgen? I knew what I wanted: to love him. That wasn't an emotion I wanted to be free of, and wasn't one I could ignore.

At the same time, I wasn't human anymore. I *would* help bring down the Superiority, and find a way to protect our reality from the delvers. I would find a way, but I was increasingly certain that way would break me.

When that happened, I had to somehow protect Jorgen from the shrapnel. I didn't want to think about it though. First, to test my newfound control, I needed to try a baby step: something I'd been avoiding the last few days—breakfast.

Doomslug clinging to my shoulder, we made our way to the mess hall—then froze in the doorway. Inside, long rows of metal tables offered up the latest chef's delights. Algae mostly, prepared in a variety of ways. But amazingly, our recent collaborations with other species had given us access to more. Alanik's and Hesho's worlds contained grains in abundance. Fruits. Meats that *weren't* rat. Delivered to us in thanks for our aid in protecting their planets.

Our cooks seemed to be enjoying the variety. If you could prepare algae in a hundred different ways, imagine what you could do with *rice*. Sure, we'd had some of these luxuries in the past—grown in specialized caverns in very small amounts for the wealthy. For that reason, I'd always felt guilty partaking. But this new style of dining—a feast of flavors in every meal—was the way things *should* be. If we succeeded, this was what *everyone* would eat.

It wasn't the food itself that stopped me in the doorway. It was the sheer cacophony. Dozens of pilots chattering. And slugs. There were several varieties, though some of the newest ones we'd discovered were still being studied, and hadn't been authorized for active duty yet. Of those at breakfast, the bulk were yellow and blue like Doomslug. Those were hyperslugs, who could help us teleport. Almost as common were the purple-and-orange slugs, who let us communicate via cytonics.

Surprisingly, there were more than a few red-and-black slugs, capable of releasing blasts of cytonic energy. We had started calling them boomslugs. Most rare were the blue-and-green slugs, capable of inhibiting cytonics, letting only friends and allies use their powers. I steeled myself against the guilt of allowing one to be killed at the facility. At least I'd rescued the other one.

Besides, I was a weapon. Weapons didn't cry over the things they killed.

Doomslug fluted softly on my shoulder. She felt...as intimidated as I did. She didn't want to go into the room either. Because...well, scud. She was *shy*.

I'd always assumed she had been with M-Bot because she'd gotten lost, or maybe she'd been the descendant of his original hyperdrive. But recently I was getting the feeling that she was the slug equivalent of an introvert. She hadn't wanted to be completely alone, which was why she'd sought out M-Bot and his dormant cytonic processor. But she wasn't the type who enjoyed hanging out in a cavern full of fluting slugs.

I tried to send her a sense of peace as we collected food from the counter—a sandwich made with...was that *peanut butter*? I'd read about that. Wow. And a real slice of some kind of orange fruit. Maybe, well, an orange. Evershore and Earth shared some ecology from their years of trading together in the distant past, and much of the food we had been able to get from them had its roots in Earth flora.

I was feeling pretty good as I settled down at a table near the right side of the room. The real test was still to come though, as my friends gathered around, each one wearing a red piece of felt behind their flight pins. A symbol of remembrance, worn each time we lost someone. Today they wore them for the two soldiers we'd lost, and the two slugs—comrades in arms.

Each one was an indictment of me. I could have saved those people. Who was I to hold this power?

"Hey!" Arturo said. "You came to breakfast, Spensa! Finally starting to feel like yourself, eh?"

"Yeah," I said, glancing at him. "Nedd...?"

"Awake," Arturo said, "and ordering me to do things for him, since with one arm, he 'can't possibly do it himself.'"

I released a long breath. If Nedd was joking already, that was a good sign. That eased my guilt a smidge.

As others set down trays, I looked past Arturo to Alanik, who settled in a few places farther along the table. She ate with Skyward Flight, even if her chosen food was different. She seemed to really *like* the algae.

The violet-skinned alien studied me quietly, with a certain reserved sensibility. She said she'd been told, by her leaders, to continue "socializing" with the humans. Her species and mine shared suspiciously similar physiology—there might be a common ancestor in our pasts. Certainly the UrDail had slipped into Earth's mythology and lore, much as the kitsen had.

Regardless, it was odd to see the person whose face I'd stolen joining us for breakfast. And it was odd to not have FM there, as she was helping Rig get a new fabrication project up and running.

T-Stall sat next to me, but he gave me space. Too much space. We'd never been that close, and he and Catnip seemed to have started integrating better with the rest of the flight while I was gone. On my other side, Sadie settled down—and looked to me with an almost *divine* admiration.

This was ostensibly where I belonged. But I felt more at home with a bunch of aliens these days than I did with my old flight. Fortunately, my newfound mental bulwark was effective. I reminded myself that it was all right—that I didn't *need* to belong, since I was just a weapon to be fired. That calmed me, and I settled into my place.

Nothing started rattling. Nobody's sandwiches vanished.

Doomslug fluted to me sorrowfully, but I scooped her off my shoulders and set her in the line of other slugs, which ran down the center of the wide metal table. They were happily munching on their caviar, offered in special little bowls. The taynix were now members of the flight. They saved the lives of my friends regularly, by hyperjumping them to safety.

*They like it here, I thought, feeling their contented minds. They like being appreciated. I think they even enjoy the human companionship.*

They were afraid of the delvers though. I'd been able to pick out some of this from Doomslug. The Superiority had manipulated this fear—rather than working with and encouraging the taynix, the Superiority had frightened them into compliance. The ease with which FM and the others had instead coaxed and befriended the slugs was the ultimate recrimination of the Superiority's so-called primary intelligence. Our enemy claimed to

avoid aggression and support peace, but in truth they only did so when convenient.

*But Doomslug is not afraid of me,* Chet thought from within me. *Not any longer.*

Doomslug sent an image to us in response: Chet and me with yellow skin and blue tinges. She'd realized we weren't frightening. Not even delvers were. We were just very strange slugs.

"So," Kimmalyn said, leaning across the table and drawing my attention back to the conversation. "Your plan worked, Spin. I hear there's a *ton* of useful stuff in that data archive. *Twelve* other human preserves, like Detritus. Detailed schematics for all Superiority ships. And, of course, the location of the supply depots that process the acclivity stone mined in the nowhere."

"Other human preserves, you say?" T-Stall said. "I wonder if they're like us. Constantly fighting. On the brink of breaking out."

"I doubt it," I said. "I get the feeling that Detritus was unique, with our cavern complex and fabricators. The enemy didn't *intend* our planet to become a preserve; we were just too persistent to exterminate."

"Either way," Kimmalyn said, "could be worth approaching them..."

It wasn't a terrible idea. From what we'd been able to determine, the Superiority was being forced to pull fighters away from many garrisons to fight us. Some of those preserves might be poorly defended.

"I've got some of the data dump here," Arturo said, opening up his datapad. He started to show us the locations of the human preserves, but I hijacked the pad and instead scrolled to the locations of the five mining stations.

As Jorgen had indicated, our goal wasn't to hit the mining stations themselves. My friends there, like Peg and the Broadsiders, would be safe. We'd attack the supply depots on this side instead, the ones controlled by the Superiority.

Out of curiosity, though, I looked to see if the data indicated where the mining bases were in the nowhere. And the data was there. Surehold, which I'd attacked with the Broadsiders, was the biggest—but the four others were



sprinkled throughout the same region. I had assumed they'd be farther out in the belt, but it appeared they just kept them very well hidden.

"Still can't believe it," Sadie said, leaning down low, speaking softly. "The Superiority is so *vulnerable*."

"I was there last night when they broke down the data," Arturo said. "Cuna is right. The Superiority is so paranoid about keeping the slugs a secret that they've created a bigger problem for themselves. For example, almost all communications in the Superiority are underpinned by a *single* network, one location that holds a large batch of commslugs to facilitate comms traffic."

You didn't need a slug on each end to make cytonic communications work. With enough practice, and the right technology on the receiving end, a single slug could manage multiple different conversations. A little like an operator on an old-school communications rig.

*Yup! M-Bot said in my head. Fun fact. The first recorded Earth cytonic, Jason Write, dedicated only a tiny portion of his brain to the task—but was able to run dozens of communications almost like a background process. With training, the early Earth cytonics were able to facilitate thousands upon thousands of calls, all by themselves.*

I jumped despite myself. *How long have you been back?*

*I never left. I just hid. I've been watching for a while now. Some...time? Hard to say in here...well, you know how it is.*

I did, and I also had a better understanding of why time was so strange in the nowhere. The delvers had an omnipresent effect on the place. They wanted to forget the past, so everyone there started to do the same. The delvers ignored time, and so it was hard for everyone to track.

They did it because they were still searching for a way, even now, to deaden the pain of loss.

*Jason Write, M-Bot said. Yes. The delvers, who were only a single individual back then, loved him. When he died, they didn't know how to respond to their grief so...all of this. The result of one former AI's emotional constipation.*

Ew.

FM finally arrived, carrying three slugs at once. She'd really gotten into the entire slug thing, which I found odd. She was so prim, and slugs didn't really match her normal fashionable accessorizing.

I immediately felt guilty for that snideness. Yes, FM liked to be fashionable, but she'd never given me reason to think she was vain. I'd just always felt intimidated by how...well, perfect she was at basically everything. Even, it turned out, taking care of slugs.

She set her three down with their own bowls of caviar—we had to ship the stuff in from Evershore in bulk—and started talking, animated. “Coordinated raid on all five mining installations,” she explained. “Tomorrow morning at oh six hundred hours. Orders should be coming to Arturo any minute.”

“They're here,” he said, scrolling on his datapad. “Five strike forces, all at once.”

“Why five?” I asked. “We know one of those is already locked down on the other side by the Broadsiders.”

“Can you say for certain your friends are still in control?” FM asked. “And that they wouldn't open up the portal again if properly bribed? Would they sell acclivity stone to the Superiority if the value of the stuff increased a hundredfold?”

Would they? Maybe, maybe not. Life was tough in the nowhere. I wouldn't blame Peg for making some calculated bargains if the Superiority tried to trade with her. I'd trust her and the others not to do it if I asked, but I could understand Jorgen wanting to remove that option by destroying the Superiority facility.

“It would be pointless to go through all of this and still leave them with a functioning mining station,” FM said. “So we're striking all five. Tomorrow.”

“That's good,” Catnip said. “It's the only shot we have at winning. Stop them making any more starfighters.”

“Still sounds like we're in for a slog of a war,” Sadie said. “Sure, we can maybe take out their production capacity—but we still have to fight through everything they've already built.”

“Do we have any choice?” Kimmalyn asked. “At least this way we have a chance.”

“I suppose,” T-Stall said. He shared a look with Catnip, his wingmate.

Arturo finally spoke. “Anyone else have a problem with the level of destruction we caused on the last raid?”

They didn’t look at me. That was nice of them. Perhaps they knew that nothing was more painful than having my friends be afraid of me. But of course, I was just a weapon now. So that couldn’t bother me the way it once had.

Though they were doing their best not to stare at me, I looked around the group, huddled forward surrounding our long table. FM scratching the head of one of the slugs. Sadie sitting back, as if she’d lost her appetite. Arturo pretending to scroll through the data, though his eyes were distant. Alanik hovering at the edge of the group, aloof as always. Catnip and T-Stall, side by side, staring at their unfinished meals. Kimmalyn still eating her brownie with a small fork, because she never wasted a dessert. “As the Saint said,” she had once noted, “‘Throw away something delicious, and you throw away *beauty itself*.’”

“I’ll say it,” Kimmalyn said. “What we did was wrong. At the very least, we should have found a way to save that first slug. *I* should have found a way. But beyond that...”

“I didn’t expect the information nexus to be so much like...a city,” I told them.

“Yeah,” FM agreed. “I mean, it makes sense that they’d need noncombatants to work it. Researchers, engineers. People like Arturo would be, if he hadn’t fallen in with the wrong crowd.”

“Hey,” Arturo said. “Wait. Was that a dig at me, or at all of you?”

“It was a deliberate ricochet,” FM said. “How many of you felt the last raid was wrong?”

Slowly, everyone raised a hand. Even Alanik, who took a moment to realize that meant agreement.

“We should say something to Jorgen,” Kimmalyn said. “We’re here to fight the Krell. Not become them.”

“He’s aware,” I said. “He’s planning how to ensure that we’ll know in the future if there are civilians in the way or not.”

“And if there *are*, will he stop us from going in?” FM asked.

He...hadn’t said that, had he? He’d told me he wouldn’t send me in unaware again. But the mission likely would have to continue.

“I do not like the idea of doing that sort of thing again,” Kimmalyyn said. “Not at all. I saw...stars, I saw dozens of civilian ships fall in the destruction.”

My stomach turned.

“Do we have a choice though?” Sadie whispered. “We’re warriors, right? We break things. People. That’s the point, right?” She looked to me for support.

I forced myself to nod.

“That’s easy for you to say, Spensa,” FM said, though I hadn’t actually said anything. “You’re...well, you.”

Yeah. I sure was. Me. Mostly.

“It’s more difficult for the rest of us,” Arturo agreed. “We’re not so hardened. Fighting while knowing there were civilians panicking down below...that was horrible. I don’t look forward to doing it again.”

“These supply depots...” Sadie said. “They’re going to be full of civilians. Workers. Even if we don’t hit the mining stations in the nowhere—even if we just hit the portals on this side...well, who do you think is cleaning those stations? Moving the rock around? Refining it into pure acclivity stone. It’s not Winzik’s warriors.”

We all sat there for a while. I reminded myself I was a weapon. That I didn’t care—that I couldn’t *afford* to care. But then Kimmalyyn astonishingly put down her fork and pushed her dessert away, half-finished.

“We need to figure this out,” FM said. “Jorgen’s plan is to hit the stations tomorrow and destroy all of them.”

“Do we need to *destroy* the installations?” I asked. “Maybe we could just secure and hold them.”

“Holding ground is tough,” Arturo said, “particularly against a superior force. Better to disable the installations.”

“If we do that, won’t we be trapping everyone who’s in the nowhere?” Sadie said. “With no means to return to the somewhere?”

“Not necessarily,” Alanik said, her translated words coming from my pin. “There might be other portals. Places where there aren’t mining stations.”

“There are,” I said. “But most of them are locked somehow. Something odd happened to them years ago.”

“Could we unlock one?” Alanik pressed. “That seems like what Jorgen did, in freeing the kitsen cytonics.”

She was right, but I was reluctant to experiment there. After Gran-Gran and Cobb had gotten stuck in one of those portals...well, it seemed dangerous to toy with them.

At the same time, this felt like an important thing to know. If we destroyed these installations, could the Superiority just send ships in through other locations, then fly a little longer through the belt of the nowhere and recover their supplies anyway?

If I knew the answer, it might change our plans. Might persuade Jorgen not to go through with this attack.

Suddenly, I couldn’t maintain my stoic sense that I was a weapon. I needed another solution. Though it was a betrayal of my warrior forebearers, I wanted nothing more than to just *not* have to go back into battle tomorrow.

So, without a word to the others, I scooped up Doomslug and hyperjumped away—intent on visiting Detritus. And learning for myself what could be done with the inactive portal hiding in the caverns beneath its surface.

# 10

**T**hese days, entering the nowhere was an odd experience. Doomslug and I popped in briefly between moments, in the place that was commonly full of the eyes. Pinpricks of light in the blackness that normally, in the past, had glared at me with an incredible sense of malevolence.

This time, like every time in the past twelve days, they were missing. Pure blackness confronted me. No eyes. No delvers.

I'd once thought I didn't understand this place, *couldn't* understand it. I was mortal, and my mind too accustomed to the passage of time and linear relationships. But my soul was part delver now. Strange as it was, I could see what they were doing. They *were* here. Camouflaged by turning their attention inward. Hiding not just from me, but from one another. I got the sense they did this only when I was there, only when time entered the nowhere because I was hyperjumping through it.

*The secret is here, in how I interact with them,* I thought. *The way to defeat them once and for all.* It might have to do with the way they hid.

A pair of eyes popped up beside me. *Hi!* M-Bot said. *Welcome to my home! It's only the size of an infinitely small point, but so am I, so it's enough!*

A heartbeat later Doomslug and I left, appearing in a different kind of mundane darkness. The caverns underneath Detritus.

Though cytonics could “see” by use of their powers—Gran-Gran was a good example, though she hadn't realized she was doing it—I didn't have much talent in that area. Fortunately, my multitool had a small flashlight. I

slipped it from its spot on my belt and turned on the soft green light, illuminating a large cavern—and startling a number of scuttling inhabitants.

I couldn't help but grin. I knew this cavern. I'd hunted in it—and it seemed that in my absence the rats had been on a rampage and fed freely on the fungus here. "Fear not," I announced to them, "though I have returned, I come not for your blood! Turns out I prefer peanut butter. Enjoy your respite, fell beasts."

They didn't seem inclined to take my word for it, and remained hiding in the nooks and nearby crevices. I continued through the chamber, feeling a certain nostalgia. I'd become a pilot. Spensa the rat girl was no more.

Was it strange to miss those days? They'd been terrible in many ways. The Krell had been an omnipresent danger. Plus my family had suffered from lack of food, discrimination, and long hours of work.

Yet back then, all I'd been in charge of was getting some rats to sell. Now, the fate of planets was on my shoulders.

My hyperjump had been off by a short distance. The portal wasn't in this cavern, but in a nearby tunnel. My memory proved good after all these months, and I easily made my way up along a tunnel—finding the spot via an ancient tube that emerged from the rock, carrying water to other parts of the cavern complex. I trailed along, one hand on the stone, until I reached the portal.

It was on the wall. A large section of stone that partially blended into the surrounding rock, carved with strange symbols. Years ago I'd known there was something odd about these alien markings. The unusual surface held whispers you couldn't hear, but could feel.

I rested my fingers on the grooves. In the nowhere, I'd traveled on a heroic journey—recovering memories of the past. That journey, it turned out, had been concocted by Chet in order to give me information that I needed, but that he hadn't otherwise known how to deliver.

The memories had been real though. Today, I closed my eyes and reached into the past. Listening. Each time someone had used this portal, they'd left a piece of themselves behind, inscribed by these lines.

In this one, I saw humans. Humans who had come here in secret, to build a new kind of weapon. A facility for trying to control the delvers.

I saw humans quarrying stone from the nowhere and transporting it out. I saw their enormous fabrication machines building shipyards in the sky, which then built the other platforms. This location had been chosen for two reasons. The first was the large ring of asteroids around the planet, which had been entirely consumed by the fabricators.

But the second, true secret—the real reason—had been this portal. An open one, into the nowhere. A place to get acclivity stone. A place to try to control the creatures beyond dimensions and space.

I pulled my hand back. I'd already seen the end result of those experiments on a recording my friends and I had watched. We'd seen what had happened when a delver had come to Detritus and destroyed the humans living here. That had been long before M-Bot had crashed here, and even *that* had been a century before my own people had found their way to the planet.

Seeing all of this reminded me of what Brade had said. That our *destiny*, as humans, was to do what our ancestors had failed to do. Conquer the galaxy.

Turning my thoughts in that direction was a mistake. I could feel my soul beginning to vibrate, and Brade's attention focusing on me. Perhaps because I'd just opened myself to the memories of those ancient humans, I was exposed, and she latched on. In a panic, I realized that if she saw what I was doing, it might tip her off to our plan.

*Don't see. Don't see!*

Brade appeared in front of me as a cytonic projection. She looked around, frowning. And she *didn't* see. Her eyes passed over the wall as if nothing were there—for in my mind's eye, that was how I viewed it. Just a featureless wall. To reinforce that, I started walking, as if there was nothing special about where I'd stopped.

Her ability to see my surroundings was predicated on how *I* saw them. Was this similar to how the Krell had convinced my father that he was



seeing enemies when he flew among friends? Was this the method by which our enemy could hijack a cytonic's senses?

They'd turned my father against the people who loved him—and I had *not* forgotten my anger. Brade upheld that system.

I had given up on trying to bring her to my side. But perhaps she didn't need to know that.

"So," she said, "are you ready to accept what I've been telling you? Ready to do what needs to be done, Spensa?"

"We're doing that right now," I replied. "Overthrowing the Superiority *is* what needs to be done. Join me, help me."

She smiled, perhaps at my naivete.

How would she try to use me this time?

"Winzik is going *crazy* over that information storage you took," she said. "All of his secrets in the hands of enemies. That was a clever strike. He should have realized the repercussions of you having a minister-tier government official on your side. He had Cuna locked out of our systems, but of course he can't lock them out of their own mind."

"Well," I said, "soon he'll see the consequences of his mistake."

"Come now. Your military is so small. You're no match for ours—you should join with us, become our enforcers. I could persuade Winzik to see you as mercenaries instead of enemies to be quashed. If you serve us."

"Brade," I said, leaning into my lie, "we won't be small for long. Join *me*. We'll soon have entire forces of disgruntled humans on our side. You belong here."

She turned away from me, perhaps to hide her growing grin—though I could faintly feel satisfaction radiating from her. She had believed my lie—she assumed our purpose in stealing the data archive was to find the other human preserves like Detritus.

Perhaps we *would* approach those humans. Eventually. So it was a plausible, reasonable goal—just not our main one. And Brade bought it.

In turn, I was shocked by how easily I'd sold that lie. For months now, I'd worried that I wasn't a spy or a scout, despite being required to do both repeatedly. I kept telling myself I was a pilot. Yet I'd managed to infiltrate

the Superiority's space force, then get into the nowhere and take over one of their mining installations from within.

I *was* a spy. It wasn't what I'd intended to become, but it was where the job had taken me. The best way to learn to fly was to just get into a cockpit and practice; it seemed that the same was true of subterfuge.

*I did plan the takeover of Surehold, I thought. And it worked. I wonder...*

A thought started to come together, but I put it aside for now. I needed to deal with Brade.

"Go," I snapped at her. "Leave me alone. Tell Winzik I'm coming for him with the thirst of a thousand battlefields, longing for blood. I will enjoy the chance to sink my blade between the layers of his carapace, prying him from the shell. Then I shall watch—with exquisite satisfaction—as he suffocates in the callous air."

She cocked her head at me. To be honest, I felt rather satisfied with that boast. Beowulf would have been proud of me. I could move toward being less bloodthirsty, but still appreciate a good boast, right? Boasts and threats were basically ways to get your enemy to back down—so they were actually pacifist in nature.

Maybe that was what Conan the Cimmerian had always been about. Perhaps all the lines about the lamentations of women and drinking blood from skulls were meant to persuade people to go home and *not* try to assault the two-meter-tall fellow with cannonballs for pectorals.

Brade growled, then muttered, "You're wasted on this pointless fighting, Spensa." But she left, and I could feel—cytonically—that she was actually gone. I let out a long breath.

*She's unnerving, M-Bot said in my mind. I don't trust her, Spensa. I hope you don't either.*

"I don't," I assured him, hurrying back to the portal. "I think I might have tricked her though. It—"

My words fell short as the corridor suddenly became very crowded. FM, Arturo, and Kimmalyln appeared, standing around Alanik in a ring, their

hands on the UrDail's shoulders, slugs fluting and cooing from their slug holsters.

Alanik eyed me. "It is customary to warn others before you use your powers to jump," she said. "You do not know this, as you were not raised around other cytonics, but leaving so abruptly can be disorienting for those nearby."

"Noted," I said, more annoyed at her than embarrassed. They were my powers. I could decide what was appropriate and what wasn't. I didn't need an alien reprimanding me.

"So, what are we doing here?" Arturo asked, his hands on his hips. "Checking out the portal into the nowhere? We were talking about that before you slugged off, Spensa."

Slugged off? I wasn't sure what I thought of that particular piece of slang. Regardless, I walked back to the right spot and placed my hand on the wall. I could feel the heat of Igneous, the city where I'd grown up, pulsing from a nearby chamber. Sweat trickled down my temple.

"We need to know how easy it is to get through one of these," I said, patting the portal. "I've told you all about my pirate friends in the nowhere. Perhaps we should talk to them. They might be able to help."

"These portals are dangerous," Alanik said, sounding stern. "Your own grandmother ended up trapped in one. And you got sucked into a dangerous realm by touching one."

*Gosh, thanks,* I thought. *I hadn't remembered that, Mom.*

I'd spent so many days during my time at Starsight wondering about Alanik and what she was like. I had *not* expected to find her so bossy.

"If they're dangerous, we need to know," I said. "That's part of why I came alone."

"Spin," Arturo said, "you need to stop being so reckless. You're basically our entire space force."

"We have to take risks, Amphi," I snapped, pressing my hand against the portal again. "We do it every time we fight. *Someone* has to figure out how these portals work; they offer a huge tactical advantage. And I have the most experience."

“The delvers—” Kimmalyln started.

“*Are frightened of me,*” I said. “They hide when I hyperjump. I haven’t seen the eyes in almost two weeks now.”

The others grew silent. When I glanced at them, I saw a collection of baffled—even intimidated—expressions.

“The delvers are *frightened* of you?” FM said.

Right. I hadn’t actually explained that to them, had I?

Well, I was a weapon. I reaffirmed that belief to myself. I’d been weak earlier, but I couldn’t afford weakness. It didn’t matter if I was divided off, isolated from others. Didn’t matter if everything was different, wrong, broken.

This was what I needed to do. This was what I needed to be.

I closed my eyes, feeling at the portal, and tried to push through it. I’d done this on the other side several times, looking for a way out. On those occasions, I’d always hit some kind of wall. The explanation, which had made sense to me, was that the portal had been locked on this side. Perhaps to keep the delvers in.

This time, I encountered no lock. I found a vast, inviting pool of darkness—a tunnel leading toward infinity. The nowhere lay before me, an expanse that was at the same time as small as the point of a pin. A place where time wrapped upon itself, and where...

Wait. This was wrong.

I felt Alanik’s mind brush mine, asking if I was all right. I replied that I was, and suggested she back off for now. She did, leaving me to explore what I was feeling.

This place *was* wrong. I wasn’t certain what tipped me off. The sight, the cytonic resonance, the smell...none of those described it perfectly, but together they meant something. This wasn’t the nowhere. It wasn’t where I wanted to go.

I yanked back as something tried to close around me. I was out in a moment, in that corridor again. I gasped, pulling my hands away. Scud. Everyone had fetched chairs from somewhere. What...

“How long was I gone?” I asked.

“Four hours,” Arturo said. “A little less, actually.”

“Alanik said you were confident everything was all right,” Kimmalyln added. “We set up here to wait, just in case. Are you...are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “But I think I know what happened to the kitsen cytonics.”

“What?” Alanik said, stepping up beside me. “What did you feel?”

“A trap,” I whispered. “Alanik...the portals aren’t locked to keep the delvers in. It’s to keep us *out*. The delvers...I think they did something to these to *intentionally* draw in cytonics and hold them. Wait a moment.”

“But—”

“Just wait,” I snapped, pressing my hand to the lines again, trying to read the memories to find out when this particular trap had been made.

How long ago had the kitsen cytonics vanished? Before the delvers existed, I thought, though my understanding of the timeline was unclear.

I watched the memories, but they too were vague. Difficult to judge the timing. Many of them were just impressions, while others were expansive visions about the lives of the people living here. Which was great, but didn’t have anything to do with my current questions.

Finally, I was able to piece together that this particular portal had been altered to become a trap during the delver attack that had annihilated the humans who had built Detritus. I caught a faint sense of the delver’s memories as it made the swap. A kind of...troubleshooting sensation? Was that right? As it booby-trapped the portal?

*This is a natural phenomenon, I realized. Sometimes these portals develop an oddity that traps minds instead of letting them pass. The delvers learned of this, and made the portals develop the flaw intentionally.*

That explained what had happened to Gran-Gran. And it also might explain why the Superiority was forced to rely on so few mining stations. There just weren’t that many portals still unlocked and untrapped.

“I might be able to fix this portal eventually,” I told the others. “Or perhaps Jorgen could do it. But right now it’s booby-trapped, just like the one on Evershore. The delvers altered it to capture cytonics—and stop people from traveling into the nowhere.”

“So...” Arturo said. “No contacting your friends on the other side?”

“Not through this one,” I said. “Fortunately, this means that if we *do* capture or destroy those supply depots, the Superiority is going to have real trouble getting into the nowhere to bring back acclivity stone.”

Assuming we were willing to go through with it. Though I’d heard from Gran-Gran that many generals considered this important—empathizing with and understanding the enemy—I had no idea how to handle it. Maybe that was what officers were for.

Unfortunately, that made me remember Jorgen. I checked my watch and pulled up my schedule. Scud. “I have a meeting with the admiral,” I said.

“We informed him you were exploring something here,” Arturo said. “He might not be expecting you.”

I gave him a flat look. “You think *Jorgen* will ignore an appointment?”

Arturo chuckled. “Yeah, I suppose not. Even if you’re in another dimension, he’ll expect punctuality. You should go.”

I nodded, scooping up Doomslug and preparing to hyperjump. Then I paused, looking to my friends—and Alanik—who had watched over me for hours.

“Sorry,” I said to them, “that I’ve been so erratic lately. It’s going to be all right. I’m going to fix this.”

Kimmaly met my eyes. “You don’t need to do it all, Spin. Can we talk?”

“Later,” I promised. “Right now I’ve got a meeting. Not sure what Jerkface wants—but it’s probably a rundown of the upcoming mission. You know how he is.”

“I know,” she said. “Just remember. I’m here.”

I nodded to her, then hyperjumped straight into Jorgen’s quarters, where the meeting was to take place. Which...probably wasn’t the best idea. I should have gone to the corridor outside and knocked. I really was getting too comfortable with hyperjumping. I wasn’t treating my powers with the solemnity that...

I frowned, cocking my head. The lights were dim in the room, and there was food on the table. Had I interrupted Jorgen at a meal? It *was* lunchtime,

since I'd had an extended stay inside the trap. And...

Candles? Music?

Oh, scud. I turned and surprised Jorgen—who was in uniform, as always, but carrying two cups to the table.

This wasn't a battle meeting or a debriefing.

This was a *date*.

# 11

“Oh!” Jorgen said, stopping in place. “Spensa. I didn’t hear you...er... teleport...”

“Sorry,” I said, blushing. “Should have jumped to the corridor. Wouldn’t want to surprise you in a towel or something. Um. Again...”

“I thought maybe we could have a meal,” he said, gesturing to the table. “During our meeting. Since we’re both so busy these days. It would be more efficient.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “And the candles...to save on energy?”

He shrugged in an adorably awkward way, and even smiled—a bashful, boyish grin. Scud. I’d been prepared to deal with the loss of friends and home, prepared to deliver myself up as the weapon my society demanded. I’d been prepared for everything but him. This.

I clutched Doomslug for support, but she fluted at me and immediately teleported away. How had *she* known? She was a slug! The little traitor.

“We never get to spend time together,” Jorgen said. “To figure out what it is we are, what we want. So I thought maybe...I’d just take the initiative. Do the Spensa thing, you know? Jump right in.”

“I think I know what we are, together,” I whispered. “What I want it to be, at least. But I don’t know if this is the right time. With everything that’s happening...”

“Maybe for a little while, pretend it can be right?” He gestured at the table. “Look, it’s not even a proper dinner.”

“Not proper?” I stared at the immaculate place settings, the candles. He even had a white tablecloth.



“Sure,” he said. “See, there’s only three courses, and we don’t even have separate dessert spoons.”

“Oh, Jorgen,” I said, my facade melting. “Please don’t tell me you read the *rules* on serving a meal.”

“Of course not,” he said. “It was part of my tutoring. I’ve known the proper setup for a formal meal since I was seven.”

He was so earnest, so...well, wonderful. I couldn’t keep my cynicism properly in place. It fled before him like a rat from light. *All right*, I told myself. *I’ll pretend. For this meal only...I’ll pretend that it can all work out.*

Suddenly I felt...*right* again. It was probably an illusion, but in that moment I was certain this was where I belonged. Though a lot of things were off, possibly broken beyond repair—he was right, and *we* were right.

I sat in the chair he’d provided for me. Then I grabbed the knife in a fist and rammed the handle down on the table and said, “I approve of this offering.”

He rolled his eyes, getting out the first course—which was an honest-to-goodness salad with *no* seaweed or algae.

“Look,” I said to him, “you get your way to do things from your books. I get my way from mine.”

“I’ve tried to find those books,” he said. “Read a good chunk of a Conan novel while you were gone.”

“You did?” I asked, melting a little further. “Aww...”

“I didn’t find many of your quotes in there.”

“Gran-Gran liked to embellish,” I explained. “And I learned how to do a little—a lot—on my own.” I put aside the knife and attacked the salad. I’d always loved how a crunchy salad responded to the stabby-stabby motions of a good forking. I’ll admit that I also exaggerated because I knew Jorgen found it amusing. He liked to joke about how I did everything—from piloting to eating a salad—with enthusiasm.

“You ever wonder what life would be like without this?” he asked. “The war—the military. What our lives would be if we’d been born during some other time?”

“I used to think it would be boring,” I said, spinning my fork, and finishing off the salad with a good coup de grâce. It tasted wonderful—so much better than seaweed, which had to be dried to imitate this crispness. There was even some *beat*, which I’d last eaten in the nowhere.

I liked it here, though I could remember responding differently there. Those days, now only two weeks past, were starting to take on a dreamlike air. Had that really been me having those adventures, in a land where time barely mattered?

“Used to?” Jorgen asked, drawing my attention back to the meal. “You think differently now? You wouldn’t find a life without fighting boring? What changed?”

“Starsight,” I said. “I saw people living real lives, Jorgen. Our enemies, but they were just people. Building families. Living. I realized *I* was the broken one, not them. Now it sounds *wonderful* to live a life without the war. I could still fly; that wouldn’t change. I could do it all day, to keep my skills up, then come home at night—and you’d have spent your day doing something Jorgenesque. Finding misspelled words in operations manuals maybe.”

“Please,” he said. “It’s not the misspelled words that are a problem. I barely even mark those when I find them. It’s the regulations being out of order or having the wrong numbers that’s a problem—that might cause a breakdown of command.”

He leaned on his elbow, smiling at me, then suddenly he blushed and glanced down at his plate.

*I implied that we’d be living together*; I realized. Our relationship was so weird. Probably because it was always being interrupted when I went galivanting off. At times it was like we’d always been together. At others, the mere mention of our status made us blush like schoolkids.

“Hey,” I said to him. “You said we should pretend it can all work out. Right? Well, why don’t we pretend something else too? That it’s not awkward. That it’s okay. Whatever we are, it’s okay, Jorgen.”

“Deal,” he said. Then he took the top off the tray, revealing the next course.

Steak.

He'd found us *steak*.

I'd read about it. I'd occasionally had tastes of pork as a pilot—though mostly chicken or soy had been the proteins available in flight school. I was well acquainted with the taste of rat. But I'd never had an *actual* steak.

"Scud!" I said. "How much did those *cost*?"

"You saved the entire planet," he said. "*Twice*. Does it matter how much it cost?"

"Where did you even get it?"

"There are cows on Evershore," he said. "I've always wanted to try some."

I poked at the brown lump of flesh, and then cut into it. And scud, it *bled*. "It's not cooked!"

"The kitsen chefs tell us this is how it's supposed to be," he said. "They...were very assertive about it."

Huh. I tried a bite, and found it strangely soft. I'd assumed steak to be a warrior's meal—but I was accustomed to meat being stringy and tough. That seemed like what a warrior should eat. Not this soft, melting pillow-meat.

I didn't say anything though, because he'd obviously put a lot of effort into this meal. Indeed, I put aside my worries for the moment and scooted my seat around the table and pulled my plate up next to his. I wanted to sit beside him, not so far away.

Sitting so close instantly made it hard to cut our steaks, but I didn't retreat. I'd laid a claim on this particular hillside, and I would defend it until I fell. I wanted to be next to him right now. Awkward or not.

Jorgen looked at me, then deliberately cut his steak into a lot of little chunks. That seemed strange until he put his knife down and started eating with just his fork, which let him put the other arm around me. His heat, his muscles, tight against mine. Awkward, yes. It was harder to eat this way, but I wouldn't have changed a thing.

"This is the single most romantic thing I've ever done," I told him.

“Me too,” he said. Then he grimaced. “Not a lot of competition, mind you...”

“Oh, come on,” I said, leaning against his chest, our meal forgotten for now. “Me attacking you back in flight school wasn’t romantic?”

“It’s slightly outdone,” he said, “by the time you forced me to break protocol to help you steal a booster for M-Bot.”

“At least the time I appeared as a ghost in your bathroom was romantic, right?”

“Why do all of these examples involve me being embarrassed, humiliated, or bullied?”

I pushed against him, practically shoving him off his chair as I got in close. “And this? Does this embarrass, humiliate, or bully you?”

“Not sure,” he said. “But whatever it is...I could use a little more of it.”

I smiled, wondering what was next. Was this the part where he swept me off my feet? I’d never understood that phrase. The only time I wanted to be carried was if I was bleeding out, and he was romantically carting me to the medic. Instead, I gave up trying to scoot closer and closer, and crawled up onto him—in his lap, facing him, my hands on his shoulders, my head level with his and our noses nearly touching.

Tentative, he put his hands around me. And maybe now I could see the appeal of being “swept.” His arms pulled tighter. Making me feel safe, because whatever life threw at us, one of us could fix it. Either I’d shoot it in the head, or he’d wrap the problem in rules and regulations until it didn’t know which way was up. *Then* I’d shoot it in the head.

I felt so horribly awkward. Was this seductive? It felt embarrassing. Why did nobody in the stories ever feel embarrassed? All the same, I *loved* it.

And stars, if I could have frozen a moment, that was the one I’d have picked. Particularly as I—building up my courage—leaned forward and kissed him. A real kiss, the way I’d always wanted and imagined. Not a quick peck in the dining hall. A deep, full, extended kiss—a melding of two selves, our breath, our heat, our very souls.

I pulled back and smiled.

He cleared his throat “Um...what now?” he asked. “I don’t, um...I mean...”

“Little fast?” I asked.

“A little,” he admitted.

“Then maybe we can just sit like this,” I said. “A little longer before finishing the meal.”

He smiled. “I’m sorry for how weird I’ve been lately.”

“How weird *you’ve* been?” I said from his lap. “Jorgen, I’m the one with a delver piggybacking my soul.”

“Yeah, but that sort of thing is expected of you.”

“It is?”

“Sure. The fact that you do unexpected, unbelievable things is basically your primary trait. I’m supposed to be the straightforward, stable one.” He grimaced, hands still on my sides, fingers wrapping around to my back, thumbs on the front rubbing against my ribs, inching idly upward, bringing an increasing flush to my cheeks.

*Please. Let this last.*

But it couldn’t. Because it was *so* hard to keep pretending that I was good for him. That I wouldn’t blow all of this up and hurt him—making his feelings the collateral damage of my inevitable implosion. He’d asked me to pretend for this meal, and I had. But this wasn’t reality for me, not any longer. Not as the weapon I had become.

As soon as reality reasserted itself, I couldn’t help remembering what I’d done on Luna. How little control I had. How likely I was to hurt him.

My soul started to vibrate as I thought about it. About what would happen if instead of teleporting random objects around me, I started teleporting *people*.

Beyond that, Jorgen seemed so distracted by his duties. I didn’t want to push him further. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go further myself.

So I climbed free, settling back on the seat beside him. He put his arm around me and leaned against me, sighing. And this did seem less awkward. I snuggled against him. Like a slug in her sling. Holster. Whatever.

“How did we get here?” he whispered eventually. “You realize that the entire universe turns on what I decide next? I don’t know what to do. Why does everyone think *I* will know what to do?”

“Because,” I said, poking him in the side, “I’m pretty sure out of all the people in the DDF, you’re the only one who has *actually* read the entire policies and procedures manual.”

“I know it’s a joke, but you really shouldn’t say things like that. New recruits might think it’s okay to ignore the manual.”

Scud. He really thought that we had all read it, didn’t he? I didn’t say anything. He’d be mortified if he knew the truth. But Jorgen, blessed Jorgen, was lost in his own thoughts. He did tend to get that way. He hadn’t even realized, moments ago, what he’d literally had in his hands.

Perhaps with good reason. He had just cause to be distracted.

“If I make the wrong call,” he whispered, “so many people will die.”

He felt so tense. Yeah, he didn’t need seduction. He needed something else. Similar, but different.

“Come,” I said, pulling him to his feet. I settled him on the floor, then sat behind him on his couch and forced him to pull his uniform jacket off. I hadn’t ever really given a massage before, but I’d punched a lot of punching bags, so I figured I had *some* experience.

He groaned softly as I kneaded his shoulders. “That’s nice,” he said. “Thanks.”

“I didn’t think about how stressful this has been for you,” I told him.

“Scud, yes,” he said. “It was bad enough when it was only our flight I had to worry about—now *every* person we lose, it’s my fault, directly or indirectly. I hate it. Except...”

I pressed at the knots in his back, waiting.

“...except,” he continued, “if *I* don’t do this, someone else will. And these days I’m not convinced that any of them can. Strangely, I’m the most capable person for the job, now that Cobb has stepped down. Which means that if I say no, and someone else gets even *more* people killed, that will be my fault too.”

“That’s a twisted way of looking at it, Jorgen.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But it’s also true. Stepping back now would be cowardice—not in some clichéd way. True cowardice. Because I *know* I can do the best job, so if I abandon this post, I’m doing it to force someone else to make the tough decisions. I’m many things, Spensa, but I’m not that man. The man who would let people die to avoid feeling responsible.”

“I understand,” I said. “This...I think I legitimately do.”

“I know.” He reached up to rest his hand on mine, which was on his shoulder. “People think we’re different; they find it strange that we’re together. They don’t see this. There are things that somehow I know only you understand.”

I let my soul cytonically reach out to his. Vibrate against him, giving him a warming sense—telling him that I *did* understand. He was facing the same moment I had, in the cockpit long ago, learning where the real line between cowardice and heroism lay.

As I did, I felt the delver inside me watching all of this. Learning it... and remembering. Yes, this was what it was like to be alive. This was what it was like to connect with someone. This had led to pain, but it was so wonderful.

*Wonderful enough to be worth the pain,* I told the delver. *That is what your kind have forgotten. I forget it sometimes too. That’s why I need Jorgen. To remind me.*

*That...* Chet replied, *is what I need to remember.*

Jorgen’s soul vibrated back against mine, and the knots in his shoulders finally started to soothe away. Stars. I’d do *anything* to help him carry this burden. I’d been so focused on myself, I’d entirely missed what this was doing to Jorgen. I really leaned into the massage, and he sighed. Then he stretched.

“All right, your turn,” he said.

“But—”

“Spensa, I can *feel* the tension in you. You can’t show me your soul and then think you can lie. Besides, I’m well aware how hard these last few months have been for you.”

Damn. Well, I supposed he was right. Best to just go with it. I climbed off the couch, threw off my uniform jacket, and flopped down on the floor in front of him.

“Have at it, then,” I said. “Don’t be gentle.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said with a chuckle, beginning to massage my back.

After a moment of being annoyed at it, I reached back and undid my bra. He hesitated.

“Is...that a sign?” he asked.

“Jorgen, we blasted right past all the signs. I was *literally* in your lap a minute ago. But right now, I was promised a back massage—and that’s all I want, if you please.”

He chuckled, though there was an uncomfortable edge to it, and leaned down to continue massaging my back through the thin cloth of my dress shirt. And scud, it felt *good*. Up until this point, I’d had an unofficial “nobody touches Spensa without getting punched” policy in my life. I might have been a little...on edge about the subject.

But this was so warm, his hands so inviting. Each time they moved to a new part of my back, my skin tingled, and a new ripple of pleasure moved through my body. Yeah, the no-touching policy definitely needed some revision—a loophole for Jorgen. Best part was, this didn’t feel awkward. Not even embarrassing.

*Maybe we don’t need to be just a weapon, Chet thought. I see how important this is. The importance of having something to come home to.*

I wanted to agree. I really did. But part of me held back, worried about the things I’d been doing lately.

*I don’t want to be a monster, Spensa, Chet thought. None of us wanted to be monsters. We delvers just wanted to hide from the pain. And that made us forget how to love, or show empathy. Don’t make the same mistake.*

I didn’t want to confront that, so I lay there and enjoyed the massage until Jorgen’s alarm beeped. I cracked an eye, checking the clock.

“You only scheduled an hour for lunch, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Er, yes,” he admitted.



“And now...?”

“I have half an hour to prepare for the planning meeting, where we’ll go over tomorrow morning’s coordinated attack.”

“Great,” I said. “You can do that. So long as you don’t need your hands. Keep massaging.”

He chuckled. But I knew the delay would start eating him up. So I let him do a few more passes on my back, then I sighed and sat up, reaching up behind inside my shirt to fiddle with the bra and get it fastened.

“Later?” he said to me. “Once all this is done. I’ll read the signs better.” He hesitated, then smiled. “I don’t suppose you can write out a manual for me or something?”

I smiled back, settling onto the couch. “I’ll think about it. That can wait. But Jorgen, the way you’re beating yourself up *can’t* wait. We should talk about it.”

“I don’t know what there is to say,” he said, bringing me my forgotten steak. “I’ve accepted the burden. I’ll do what needs to be done.”

I dug in, finishing the food—I needed the protein, and it would be wrong to waste this. I tried to ignore how like me he sounded when he said that. Scud.

“I know,” he said between bites, still standing, “what the others are saying. They’re worried about our attacks harming noncombatants.”

I stayed silent, just chewing.

“The thing is,” he continued, “my gut says we have to strike in the absolutely most efficient way. We’re walking a sword’s edge, Spensa, just barely balancing. We need *every* advantage we can get.

“If I order the team to focus on anything other than getting the job done, it won’t be only a few lives that are lost—it could mean millions. It could mean Winzik being able to exterminate everyone who disagrees with him. It could mean slavery or annihilation for all those who sided with us.

“In the face of that, is there any room for mercy? I won’t order attacks on civilian targets, but these supply depots...they’re directly aiding the war effort, and we *need* to eliminate them.” He stared at his plate, and the

bloody mess left from his steak. “That means hurting people who most certainly don’t deserve it. I’ll carry that burden. Someone has to.”

Scud, this was ripping him apart. I could feel it vibrating from his soul to mine. Feeling that anguish made my cytonic senses begin to go out of control again, and the fork vanished from my fingers.

I wrestled back control. This was *hard*. I couldn’t ignore my emotions, what I wanted. I couldn’t *just* be a weapon. At the same time, I needed to find a way to help Jorgen shoulder this weight. Was there a way I could protect him, help him?

One idea stood out.

“Jorgen,” I said, testing whether I should say this or not. “We should be liberators. Not copy what the Krell did to us.”

“I know,” he said. “We’ll have that luxury eventually. Once we’re secure, and know the Superiority isn’t going to flatten us any moment. Once we have the upper hand, we can be more...discerning in our strikes.”

“And the hyperslugs?” I asked.

“What about them?”

“Humanoid workers bear some measure of responsibility for being part of one of those supply depots,” I said. “They know people are being forced into servitude in the nowhere to do the mining. So there’s a rationale for attacking there. But the slugs? They’re just captives. And they’re intelligent, Jorgen. Maybe they don’t think like us, but they *do* think. They’re sapient. We can’t just callously destroy enemy ‘inhibitors’ without acknowledging what we’re doing.”

“You sound like FM,” he said, but smiled as he said it. So I guess that was a good thing? “I acknowledge it, Spensa. But have you *studied* those wars you always talk about? You know most conquerors conscripted heavily from their conquered populations? War has always been packed with people who didn’t want to be there.”

He was right. These were the same justifications I’d used earlier. The slugs weren’t much different than the unfortunate Polish soldiers forced to fight for their oppressors in World War II, back in Old Earth’s history. And scud, Jorgen was absolutely right. When faced with an unfortunate soldier

who was trying to kill you, you didn't have the luxury of wondering if they wanted to do it. They were there firing on you. And, like it or not, those captive slugs were in the exact same spot.

Unless we killed them, we risked letting even more unfortunate people—or slugs—end up in the same situation. I felt Jorgen's anguish over this. It thrummed from him as he stared at his empty plate.

I almost left then, my plan coalescing. But I had to try one more thing. "At least don't attack the installation that has the Broadsiders on the other side," I said to him. "That one is fully locked down by my friends."

He considered it. "Your friends are pirates," he said. "And former Superiority officers. Correct?"

I nodded.

"Spensa, I know you trust them," he said, "but I can't. They need to do what is best for them, and I wouldn't blame them for doing so. If we destroy all the other installations, but leave that one open, your friends will be able to sell the Superiority stone at a highly, *highly* inflated price. No pirate would be able to resist that. I'm sorry. We have to hit that station too. Your friends on the other side will be safe, but this way they also won't be tempted."

It was the same argument FM had made earlier. I had been thinking about what she had said, and I'd decided that there was no way Peg would do that—she would never sell me out. But the fact that I had wondered at first was more evidence that I'd never be able to convince the others. There was no way Jorgen would accept it. I could see why, but it was still frustrating.

"I *have* to make the decision that gives us the best chance of survival," he said, reading my expression. "What the Superiority has done to the people it forces to fight us is awful, but I have to stop them to prevent more of it in the future. I owe that to *our* people."

I nodded, though I was coming to a different decision. There *was* a way out of this. I just had to solve the problem for him. My plan began to mature in my head. Risky, but full of possibility. Unfortunately, it involved several elements outside his control.

I knew right then that I couldn't tell him. Couldn't involve him. He'd consider it *too* risky. But tonight, while everyone else planned and prepared, I would have a secret mission of my own. One that, if I was successful, would lead to far less loss of life on both sides. And prevent Jorgen from taking on the burden of those deaths.

I still wasn't certain I could stop this war from destroying me. But hopefully I could keep it from destroying him too.

## 12

**T**hat night, I left on my secret mission.

*I miss having a body, M-Bot thought to me as I snuck—Doomslug on my shoulder—through the corridors of Platform Prime. Even the little drone body was fun. But I really miss my old body. I was a handsome ship, wasn't I?*

“Best I’ve ever seen,” I whispered. “Most wonderful I’ve ever piloted.”  
*And now it's scrap. That makes me sad.*

Chet quivered inside me.

*It's okay to be sad sometimes, M-Bot said to Chet. It's part of being alive.*

Chet sent back that he was learning, but the delvers—they didn't believe that learning or changing was good. Which was the problem.

I tried to ignore the full-on conversation happening between my soul and the spirit of my dead starfighter. Scud, my life was weird. At least sneaking around like this was easier now that I could hyperjump at will. Hearing someone coming up behind me, I hopped into another corridor, pressing up against a cold steel wall.

Back before I'd left for the nowhere, I'd needed specific directions in my mind in order to hyperjump to a specific location. Since my return, that hadn't been an issue. Granted, I still needed coordinates or some kind of visualization to get anywhere, but I was learning to do most of this by instinct.

I didn't know if this newfound ability was due to the delver in my soul, or was the result of practice—the familiarity with my powers I'd gained

through hard work in the nowhere.

Regardless of the reason, now I could glance into the flight deck from where I stood. It was empty, as most everyone was asleep, so I popped right past the wall at my back and straight to my ship.

Strange, how a day-night cycle still dominated our lives, even with no distinct difference between the two. So far, I'd lived on Detritus (a planet that couldn't see the sun), Starsight (a platform in space far from any star), and the nowhere (where time barely passed at all). Yet I still considered this "night." As did everyone else. Human physiology just had that hardwired in.

I began priming my starship for flight. I could do everything on my own except open the flight deck bay doors, but I planned to hyperjump out anyway. So I checked my ship's external fuel readings, double-checked the maintenance log, then pushed a ladder over and climbed up, popping the cockpit with the manual release on the outside.

Only somebody was sitting inside. And she was *knitting*.

"Gran-Gran?" I said, utterly floored.

The elderly woman had a certain earthen look to her. Like an obstinate stone, or a tough old bunch of lichen grown in one spot for hundreds of years. It was dark on the flight deck, but that didn't matter to a blind person like Gran-Gran. She'd always had an uncanny ability to perceive the world around her regardless—a sign that her cytonic abilities had been developing. The fact that she'd probably hyperjumped straight into my cockpit was another.

"Ah, Spensa," she said. "Took your time. Had to make sure the ship was flightworthy, I suppose."

"What are you doing here, Gran-Gran?" I asked.

"Knitting."

I projected annoyance at her, which made her chuckle.

"You never visit," she said. "Grandmothers always say that sort of thing. As if we don't have legs, and can't just go visit on our own. So I decided to."

"Now, of all times?"

“Think you’re so good with your powers, don’t you?” Gran-Gran said. “All fancy and grown up. Well, I’ve been listening to the stars since I was younger than you, girl. And I can tell when my granddaughter is having a rough day.” She pointed at her yarn, indicating I should feed her some more.

“Rough day?” I muttered.

“Week. Month. Year. Life.” Gran-Gran pointed more vigorously. “Feed me some blue. I have trouble distinguishing colors with the powers.”

I sighed, reaching into the cockpit and undoing some yarn for her.

“So,” she said. “Going off on your own. Again.”

“It’s always worked in the past.”

“You didn’t have any other options in the past.”

“Gran-Gran, I don’t have time for this.”

“No time for your family?” she asked. “That’s not how your mother raised you, girl. A little more yarn than that, please.”

I obeyed, stifling another sigh. Gran-Gran would be ready when Gran-Gran was ready. I just hoped I wasn’t discovered in the time it took her to say whatever it was she’d decided I needed to hear.

She just kept knitting. With frustrating calmness, needles clicking.

“How did you know what I was going to do?” I finally asked.

“I have a helper on the inside.”

“Inside what?”

“Your head.”

*Sorry, M-Bot said. But you’ve been so...pressurized lately, Spensa. I went for some advice.*

I growled softly. *Betrayed by my own faithful steed?*

“Stop that,” Gran-Gran said, rapping her knuckles against mine. “I trained you to be a bold warrior. Not a Chihuahua.”

“What’s a chihuwhatever?”

*Oh! It’s a kind of dog, M-Bot said. A little one that is also very big inside! Like me! Oh...Hum. Maybe you don’t want to hear from me right now. I can feel it. I’ll just hide back here...*

Gran-Gran went right on knitting. It seemed she wasn't going to move unless I started talking.

"I need to do this," I told her. "I have a plan, and it's going to work. And it will spare Jorgen from having to order everyone to do something that's worse."

"He *is* a nice boy," Gran-Gran said. "He's good for you, like a good pommel stone for weighting a sword. Also, his bread is quite tasty. He can follow instructions better than a certain someone."

"My mission will help him, and all of us."

"Well," Gran-Gran said, "I do not doubt your heart, Granddaughter. Or what you've accomplished. There's no one I'd prefer to entrust our safety to than you."

"Great," I said. "So why are you blocking me?"

"I just like being in a cockpit."

"Gran-Gran..."

She smiled in her devious way, continuing to knit.

"What are you making anyway?" I asked.

"Seat cover," she said. "Starships are so cold and utilitarian. They need some comfort. With flower patterns."

"Do you at least have a story you're going to force me to listen to?"

"Nope," she said. "You know them all."

"You sure?" I said. "I was hoping there might be one where the heroine roasts her 'trusty steed' and eats him in punishment for being a blabbermouth."

That earned me another rap on the back of the hand. Not a painful one, just a pointed one. "Always treat your mount with respect," Gran-Gran said. "Even if he's a blabbermouth. A knight's steed is there to help her when she's at her weakest."

"Fine," I said. "But if you're not going to tell me a story, and we're both agreed this is the best course for me to take, then *why* are you still sitting in my seat?"

Gran-Gran smiled and lifted her chin upward, closing her milky-white eyes. "Do you still take time to listen to the stars, like I taught you?"



“There’s nothing to listen to lately,” I complained. “We don’t have the Krell in orbit any longer, trying to fight us. All I heard was their cytonic communications anyway.”

Gran-Gran just sat there, chin tipped upward, eyes closed. So, with an exaggerated sigh, I did as she’d taught me. I closed my eyes and opened myself to the sounds of the sky. It was far, far easier now. Things I’d struggled with when I was younger—activating my cytonic senses, reaching out with them as if they were a new set of arms—were second nature to me now.

The sky was silent today. We tried to limit our cytonic communications. Cyphers and codes were impossible in cytonic communication—or at least they were easy to break. Because language barriers meant nothing in the nowhere, where communication worked through impressions. So a cytonic could break any code. They intuited the meaning of your message.

With the kitsen, we might now have more cytonics on our side than the Superiority. They’d spent centuries suppressing the abilities, as they were a threat to their slug-based rule. But they did have some cytonics, and so we had to be aware that anything we sent to one another could theoretically be intercepted.

The short version of all this was: silent stars. A vast emptiness.

“I don’t hear anything,” I said.

“I didn’t mean those stars, child,” Gran-Gran said. “I meant the ones down here. *Listen.*”

The ones down here? What did she mean? I felt a tugging on my senses, like Gran-Gran reaching out and giving them a soft redirection. My thoughts expanded, and I saw—in a moment—all the things I’d been ignoring to focus on the sky.

Not things. *People*. Thousands of minds surrounding me. Bright and brilliant like flares—each burning with its own passions, stories, ideas. Some were brighter to my senses, not because they were more alive, but because they were cytonic themselves.

I could sense them *all*, if I looked. All the taynix too—the slugs of a multitude of varieties. The sky was empty, but the platform and the planet

beneath were set aflame with the souls and minds of those who occupied them. It was beautiful.

Chet leaped at the sensation. This was...this was what I'd shown him at Starsight. It was what had sent him into the nowhere to become Chet. This simple realization had changed everything: the knowledge that all those points of light, the ones that he had found so annoying, were *alive*.

*It was painful*, thought the part of me that was also him. *Because I'd intentionally forgotten this fact. I didn't want to know that the points of light were alive. I wanted them to represent pain, because that would keep me away. Safe from remembering the truth, which was an even greater agony.*

In deliberately forgetting all of their pain, in seeking a place outside of time and normal reality, his kind had become the delvers. Unknowable. By design.

*No*, that part of me thought. *Not completely unknowable. You and I prove that.*

"Do you feel them?" Gran-Gran asked. "The people we protect. Our families, and their families, and their loved ones. A vast, grand constellation."

"I feel them," I said.

"We are the people of the engines," she said. "Clan Motorskaps. Once, we moved the *Defiant*—the ship that was our home. Now we live here, but our duty is the same. To keep them safe. To be the engines."

"How does an engine keep someone safe?" I asked. "I still think I'd rather be the ship's destructor."

Gran-Gran chuckled, perhaps because I'd said basically the same thing when I was a child and she'd first talked to me about our heritage aboard the *Defiant*.

"How useful is a weapon that cannot move?" she said. "How long would an army last if each of its soldiers were rooted in place? The sword is only useful if the body that holds it is nimble, capable, fleet. When our people needed safety, *we* carried them there. When it was time to fight, *we* brought the weapons to bear. Without the Motorskaps, the *Defiant* would

have been a lifeless hunk of metal floating in an infinite void. We were its blood, its life. The same is true of you, here.”

I nodded. I thought I understood.

“I want you to remember that you’re part of something grand,” Gran-Gran said. “Back when we lived on the *Defiant*, even the children were assigned ranks. Not out of some jingoistic militarism, but to make them feel they were part of something greater. We were *all* the crew of the ship, no matter how old.

“And as a ship is useless without an engine, what is an engine without people to move and protect? You act like the lone spear, Granddaughter. But a spear is always stronger as part of a phalanx.”

“So you’re saying...”

“Where are your friends? Why do you seek to do this mission on your own?”

“I can’t tell Jorgen,” I said. “He’s determined to be the one who pays the emotional toll for this.”

“So you want to do it instead?”

“Would you expect anything different of me? Isn’t that what you trained me for?”

She didn’t respond to that, though I could feel her worry. Yes, that was what she’d trained me to do. In a way, all of this was because of her, and the ideas she’d stuffed into my head. She knew it.

“If you don’t tell him,” she said, “then at least you should tell the others. A few of them. Spensa, child, don’t bear it *all*. Let some of the others have a *little* glory.”

It wasn’t glory I was interested in, but I could feel the meaning behind her words. The worry that I was spreading myself too thin, like a ship trying to use one charge of gunpowder to fire twenty-one guns. She worried that as determined as I was, I’d rush into things without the wisdom my friends could offer. Mostly she worried about me being alone.

I kept my emotions in check, hoping that I didn’t reveal too much to her. Because she was all too correct; I *shouldn’t* do this alone. I should have at

least one other person to keep me in check. To warn me if I was being crazy. To watch my back.

That was what Skyward Flight had been all about. I'd found a family among them. A place. And though I'd learned many wonderful things during my time at Starsight and in the nowhere, perhaps sometimes I'd learned the wrong lessons as well.

"If I go and get a little help," I said, "will you get out of my seat and let me continue?"

"Am I in your seat?" Gran-Gran said. "I'm sorry, dear. I'm an old blind woman, and I get disoriented sometimes."

"Gran-Gran, you're the most stubborn little ball of fire I know. Don't give me lines like that."

She chuckled. "Just trying to let you know how others feel when dealing with you, dear. It's the least I can do, considering the genes I handed you. Go, do as you—so wisely—suggested. I'll be gone when you return."

"Fine," I said, starting to climb down the ladder. I hesitated though. Trying to find the words.

"You're welcome," Gran-Gran said in the silence. "Be bold. Do as I taught you. Just don't you ever feel you have to do it alone."

I nodded and hyperjumped away—to appear in front of Kimmaly's rooms.

## 13

Kimmalyyn insisted we get Arturo. “Two is a coincidence,” she explained, “but the Saint said three is a party.”

“The Saint threw parties?” I asked, skeptical.

“She was very progressive,” Kimmalyyn said. “We need Arturo. Whatever you’re planning, I’ll feel better with three.”

“Fine,” I said, hyperjumping us to his door.

He was in, of course. Arturo hated being left out, and wasn’t nearly so much a stickler as Jorgen. But *he* insisted we get Alanik.

“She’s not human,” he explained. “She looks at things differently, and will offer a unique perspective. Plus, she won’t be worried about committing conspiritorial insubordination. She’s not part of our military structure.”

I ground my teeth, but the others nodded eagerly. “*Fine.*”

Alanik answered the door to find all three of us huddled out there, each with a slug in our arms. The alien took it in, then said, “Is this hazing? I’ve read about hazing in some of your human history texts. I’m not interested.”

“It’s not hazing, Alanik,” Arturo promised. “We’re going on a secret mission.”

“One without FM?” she noted. “I presume that Jerkface doesn’t know about it either, then?”

“It’s *very* secret,” Kimmalyyn agreed. “So secret that we’re not telling command. And we’re...kind of ignoring them.”

“Again?” Alanik said. “Is this sort of thing common in your military? Going off on your own, disobeying protocol, avoiding direct command

structures?”

“For us?” I said. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“You went off on your own too,” Arturo noted.

“It was important that I did.”

“Well, then you understand,” Kimmalyn said. “No one obeys better than those who obey their own conscience.”

“Very well,” she said. “Let me get dressed. I’ll meet you at the flight deck.”

“Don’t you want to know what the mission is?” I asked.

“Someone will tell me eventually,” Alanik said. “For now, I’m mostly curious to have been invited. I have heard enough of your exploits, Spin, that I will enjoy another opportunity to study them up close.”

Delightful. I wished I’d stopped at Kimmalyn, but too late now. I went to pick up Hesho—who readily agreed to the mission—then hyperjumped us back to collect the others and bring them to the flight deck. By the time we had our preflight checks done, Alanik had arrived. As we hovered up, connecting our ships via our light-lances, I did spot one of the engineers stepping into the chamber—perhaps to check on the noise. The woman took us in, then spun on her heel and closed the door with a clear “above my pay grade” sort of attitude.

I took that as my cue and jumped us to one of the targets that we were set to attack in the morning. A supply depot called Harkil, which the data dump indicated was attached to Surehold. The mining station in the nowhere that my friends now controlled.

We appeared on a planet.

An honest-to-goodness, real *planet*. With the first rays of this planet’s dawn painting the expanse of plants flowing out beneath our ships in brilliant gold as we zoomed five hundred feet above its surface.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so excited. I was in the middle of a dangerous and unauthorized mission. Plus, I’d technically been on planets before. Detritus was one. Evershore another.

Yet I’d come to love such sights as this. Ground overgrown with weeds and brown sagebrush. A *prairie*. Scud, it was beautiful.

We swung in low to keep below any radar—though the Superiority had far more modern scanners and would spot us if we got too close, low or not. I'd purposely hyperjumped us a ways out for that very reason. This wasn't an assault. It was something far more sneaky. Not for the first time, I wished I had M-Bot's old ship back. This Poco, though excellent—and featuring some newer additions developed using M-Bot's technology—just couldn't compete.

*Aw, he sent to me. You're so sweet.*

We skimmed the ground, just above the rippling grasses. Yes, it was kind of a snarl—like my hair on mornings after sleeping in M-Bot's cockpit. And it was mostly brown, as if it didn't get enough rain here. But none of that mattered. It was *real*, and that made it wonderful.

I realized, as we flew, that I'd begun to see the landscapes I'd passed in the nowhere as...a little too perfect. Like dioramas. Idealized encapsulations of biomes from the somewhere, sliced off and left floating in an invisible ocean.

Yet here was something incontrovertibly real. And we flew toward the sunrise. A real *sunrise*.

"Hesho," I whispered, "am I really seeing this?"

"There are some philosophers who postulate that all experience is illusory," he replied from his seat. "That we cannot trust what we see, as perception is fed *to* us via external sources, and cannot be intuited." He looked to me, then smiled. "I find such philosophies to be non-credible. *It is* real, Spin. What you experience is yours to cherish. Each sight a gemstone for your personal collection, light crystallized in your mind, made solid and captured to forever cherish."

Scud. I highly recommend that if you're going to get a copilot, you pick up a warrior poet. Hesho could make words go on overburn the same way I could push a button and make the ship fly faster.

"All right, Spin," Arturo said over the general comm. "We're at one of the supply depots. What is the mission?"

"I thought the goal was to hit them all at once," Alanik added. "As to not tip off the Superiority to what we're doing."

“That’s why we’re doing this stealthily,” I said. “The goal is to minimize casualties on *both* sides. So we’re going to fly in quietly, free their inhibitor slug in secret, and take command of the installation.”

“But as soon as this depot goes silent, they’ll *know* something is happening,” Alanik pointed out. “Even if others can’t hyperjump in to rescue this installation, someone will figure out what has happened and reinforce the four other depots. We’ll still jeopardize the other assaults.”

“I’ve got that part in hand,” I promised.

“But—” she began.

“She’s got it in hand, Alanik,” Arturo said. “Spin, what do you need?”

“If I’m right,” I told them, “then this base will use cytonic authorizations, like the one we hit yesterday.”

Cuna had explained this. Most planets and cities were severely limited in how much hypercommunication they could do. It all had to be routed through a central hub, and could be read and analyzed by the government if they wanted.

Military bases, particularly important ones, had their own hyperslugs to instantly identify incoming ships, and to instantly send for reinforcements if needed. After our successful raid the day before, Cuna’s authorization code would never work again.

So I was going to try something else. A moment later, Hesho highlighted an incoming call—cytonic. I captured it, and tried to send back a spoofed signal, indicating we were reinforcements, just in case enemy ships struck here.

Scud, I hoped this worked.

I got back an exceedingly strange response.

Hope.

A sudden elated feeling. An impression of pain, and fear, and hope shining through. I worked to interpret it, and heard a soft, fluting coo from my left. Doomslug, in her sling. Piggybacking on my cytonic impression.

Only then did I put it together. This signal—like all faster-than-light signals in the Superiority—was being facilitated by a commslug. She would



be out in this city somewhere, trapped in a tiny box. Forced into submission by punishment of pain, the enclosure preventing her from escaping.

The slugs were incredibly hardy, which worked against them. They could be locked in a box, given food and water on occasion, and would survive. In pain and sorrow.

Doomslug sent a sense of support to the other slug's mind. I caught some of it: images of caviar and safe caverns. Mushrooms plenty, other slugs for company—but most of all impressions. Safety, warmth, no fear, peace.

*We'll rescue you*, I sent to that nameless creature. *We're coming. But this has to be a secret from our enemies. Send them the following lies.*

I had her say we were a support squadron of elite soldiers, sent by Winzik to protect this location. I didn't have the authentication codes, but the slug did, and provided them on my behalf. Scud. The Superiority's fragility wasn't just in its restricted control and secrecy around the slugs. They were entirely dependent upon a group of terrified slaves.

*We'll come for you*, I promised. *Thank you.*

In return, the slug sent an impression. I was wrong. She wasn't in this city—she was in a place with thousands upon thousands of other slugs, all locked up. Imprisoned.

The Superiority's galactic communications hub. This station didn't have its own commslug; instead it had a direct line to one kept in the central hub, which it could access at will. The fluting that was projected into my brain was sorrowful.

*You can't save me*, it said.

*I'll try*, I sent back. *Someday.*

In response, she sent me an image of four other slugs who *were* trapped at the supply depot. Two inhibitor slugs, from the looks of them, and two hyperslugs. She sent these images with a plea. *Save them instead. This you can do.*

*I'll do it*, I sent her. *And I'll find you too. Eventually. I promise.*

"You're cleared," a voice said over the comm, coming from the installation. "Glad to see some support from command, finally. We've been

requesting it for months. You can land on Pad Three and catch some R&R while I work out barrack assignments.”

“Negative on that R&R,” I said back. “Sorry to pull rank, friend, but we’re here for a very specific purpose. There’s a reason we didn’t warn you we were coming. Keep our arrival quiet from the rest of the installation, and be there—in person with your highest commander—to receive us. Further instructions will be forthcoming then.”

“Oh,” they said. “Um, okay. Right. Uh. Wow. This sounds *important*.”

I smiled as they cut off the comm. This was the *other* big weakness of the Superiority. They preached nonaggression religiously, particularly to their lessers and subordinates. Even their military installations were shockingly non-militaristic. And this, as a supply depot, wouldn’t even meet that low bar of discipline.

We could almost certainly win a fight against this group. But Winzik could throw enough of the poor fools at us to be dangerous—so today, we were going to find another way.

“Wait,” Kimmalyn said to our flight, “did I hear that right? They’re going to just *let us land*?”

“Spin did something,” Alanik said. “I felt it...via cytonics. She tricked them somehow.”

“So far as they think,” I said, “we’re a special ops force sent by Winzik. Keep your helmets on, everyone, and try to look intimidating.” I thought for a moment, then continued. “Alanik, I’m glad you’re with us. Once we land, you take off your helmet; they might know what humans look like, and you’re not one. That might give us another layer of protection. Have them take us to inspect their cytonic inhibitor.”

“Very well,” she said. “Actually...this might work. It’s certainly better than another fight inside a city.”

As she spoke we came into view of the “installation.” A full city, like before. Industrially focused, certainly, but even larger than the one we’d found on Old Earth’s moon. We followed the digital instructions to Pad 3, sweeping down past large fabrication plants and machinery. Staffed, undoubtedly, by thousands of civilians.

We passed restaurants, shopping plazas, *schools*. It wasn't that different from Starsight, only it was on a planet—and had more factories than it did office buildings. That made me feel even *more* worried though, because the majority of the people we passed weren't diones or another of the Superiority's ruling species. They were people with a green carapace-like skin. They looked like some mix between reptilian and insectile. Bipedal, with a propensity for thick clothing, and large black eyes on the tops of their heads.

These weren't the privileged of the Superiority. They were workers who, using the stone sent through their portal, built starfighters. Jorgen, bless him, was planning to blow all of this up with extreme prejudice. Thousands would be killed. I couldn't even argue that he was wrong. His job was to win this war, and in so doing help everyone in the long run.

I didn't have to do that though. I could think on a different scale. I slapped my visor down as we landed in the assigned location, then unlocked my assault rifle and slung it on. I slid out of the cockpit and hopped down from the ship, joining the others lining up behind Alanik.

I'd hoped the locals would find us intimidating. But scud, the three workers who waited for us seemed *terrified*—their insectile fingers clicking as they wiggled them back and forth in obvious agitation. The group of us gathered, all armed with wicked assault rifles, helmets on and visors down, wearing bulky flight suits. Each with a slug in a sling across our backs, something I realized they would find extra intimidating. They didn't know that taynix provided cytonic powers; they thought the things were deadly poisonous.

I mean, we were still obviously human—except for Alanik and Hesho, who joined us on his hovering platform—if you were familiar with humans. Our visors only covered half our faces. But I suspected to the panicked locals, we just looked *alien*. And dangerous.

“Who's in charge here?” Alanik asked.

One of the green-skinned aliens raised a nervous hand.

“Excellent,” she said, striding up. “I am special agent Lock. I need to inspect your cytonic inhibition device.”

“Um...yes, um...sir,” the lead alien said. “But...”

He shied back as she raised her faceplate and narrowed her eyes at him. She had a good glare, and bought into my plan, executing it perfectly. Maybe I’d been a little too hard on her previously. I mean...yeah, I’d obviously been too hard on her. But it wasn’t every day that you learned the person whose place you’d taken had ended up taking your place in turn.

“This way,” the lead alien said.

We filed in behind as he led us and the other workers to a small hovership, more a moving platform than a true vessel. It slid onto one of their streets, and other vehicles made way for it.

“I’m, um, so glad you finally are here,” the alien said. “We think the problem is insubordination on the other side. Either way, we haven’t gotten a shipment from there in two weeks. We’re out of acclivity stone entirely! I had to shut down production yesterday.”

Alanik glanced at me.

“We know about the insurrection on the other side of the portal,” I said. “A group of pirates known as the Broadsiders.”

“Yes!” he said. “They’ve been a scourge there for *years*. You can fix it?”

“Yes,” Alanik said to my nod. “But first the inhibitor. We are able to tweak it in such a way as to facilitate.”

The aliens flew us down a wide street. Hesho hovered in closer to me, up near my head, watching the streets pass. “I do not like,” he said softly to me while Alanik held the attention of the green aliens, “feeling so small.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him, deliberately *not* making a wisecrack about his size.

“So many peoples,” he said. “So much variety. We wanted to escape Evershore and join the Superiority. I acted strong in front of the others because it was my life, as I had been trained. But it is difficult to be so small in such a vast universe. Particularly when you no longer rule any of it.”

“Do you miss it?” I asked, broaching a topic I’d been curious about since we returned. “Being emperor?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “I had thought I would not. I had thought that I’d be me, always—whether I ruled or not. I was naive, Spensa. I do not feel like myself without the power to command an entire people. But I should not have it. No, I should not. No one should...I see that.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think there’s an elegance to a military chain of command.”

“You do?” he said. “You certainly enjoy ignoring it. It seems everyone likes a chain of command so long as it doesn’t restrict them specifically. This is what I learned of myself. I believed in the monarchy—of course I did. Now I miss it, but only because of what I have lost.”

He glanced at me. “This is one truth the Superiority was correct about. They warned us that one person having too much power would lead to a civilization without freedom. Strange, that I should learn this lesson from those who did not follow their own counsel. They few use their precious democracy to oppress the many.”

I nodded, finding his thoughts fascinating. How often did you get to speak to someone who had held so much power, then *given it up*?

“You’re a hero, Hesho,” I said. “For what you have done.”

“If I were a hero, then I should not so violently miss rule. What is a gift, if given so grudgingly? I doubt...if I had not been lost and thought dead...I would *ever* have truly given up power. I’d have continued in that half state, playing games.” He sighed, then raised a furry fist to me. “But I am a soldier now. On I will march. We are getting far from our ships. One of us should go back, to be ready for a rescue in case this goes poorly.”

I nodded, and he zipped back the way we had come. My Poco controls had been fixed by his engineers since our raid yesterday. He could easily pilot it alone now with his smaller set of controls.

The rest of us entered a large steel tunnel leading beneath the city. I moved closer to the front of the group, to hear what the leader was saying. “You’ll want both of them, I assume?”

Alanik looked confused. Before she could respond, I said, “Yes. I understand you received another inhibitor recently?”

“Just yesterday,” he said.

The enemy had learned from our assault on the data center—taking out the inhibitors had given us the cytonic advantage. They were beefing up their defenses. Hopefully in general, all around important bases. Because otherwise, if they'd targeted only the supply depots, that meant Winzik knew what we were planning.

I had a moment of worry. Worry led to my soul vibrating—with thoughts of having led my friends to their deaths. But my spiral was interrupted as the lead alien stopped at a door along the large tunnel.

“I hope we did well,” he explained. “The instructions were to put it in the most reinforced, protected place we had. This old mining tunnel seemed perfect.”

“You did well,” Alanik said as he landed the floating platform and had an assistant lead us into the locked room. They opened it, gesturing for us to enter.

I forced my emotions into check, then walked in first.  
To find Brade inside.

# 14

I immediately went for my gun. We'd entered a small control room with some lockers on both walls and some industrial equipment along the far side. Brade stood by that equipment.

I put her in my sights.

Kimmalyn—at my side—swung down her gun, looking around with a panicked expression. One might assume her to be the least dangerous of us, because of her soft-spoken nature. But she had more confirmed kills than anyone in the flight but me.

Her rifle went immediately to her shoulder, and she engaged infrared vision on her helmet visor. Smart; she was looking for heat signatures, since she couldn't see the threat.

I just stood there—heart thundering.

"What is it?" Kimmalyn hissed. "Should I secure the aliens?"

I stared right at Brade, who eyed me, tapping her foot on the floor. I had my gun pointed at her head, but I forcibly stopped myself from firing. It was a projection. Scud, another cytonic projection.

She was subtle in the way she touched my mind. I hadn't noticed this wasn't real, despite all my training.

"We're good," I said, lowering my gun. "But the enemy is watching me."

"That I am," Brade said, strolling around, looking over the facility. "I'm ready for you. The trap falls now."

I braced myself, waiting, gun at the ready.

Nothing happened.

“Winzik placed a new inhibitor at this facility,” Brade explained to me. “The ones you’ve destroyed were decoys.”

Scud. I was about to flee into the hall, gun blazing against an ambush, until she spoke again.

“None of these humans,” Brade said, “will serve you.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

She’d prepared her trap on the wrong planet. She didn’t know where we’d landed—she was still working from the lies I’d fed her before, believing we were trying to recruit humans on one of the preserves we’d located. And her ability to project to me happened wherever I was, so she had no way to realize yet that I wasn’t where she thought.

“I knew you’d pick the most warlike and battle-ready of the humans,” she explained, raising a datapad. “They should be coming for you any moment...”

“Damn you,” I said to her. I screamed then, and shot her in the forehead—all in the name of the act—and cytonically threw everything I had at her.

Nothing happened. Scud. I’d forgotten the inhibitor—the very thing we were trying to bring down at the moment. It prevented me from doing anything with my powers. But Brade would be allowed, as she had codes. That caused my soul to tremble. Things started shaking.

My cytonic powers burst through the inhibitor, hitting Brade. Who gasped in surprise. She was stronger than I was at this sort of thing, but still she seemed shocked.

“Did you just cut through an inhibitor?” she snapped. “*How?*”

How indeed?

*Delvers always ignore inhibitors, a part of my soul said. You become more and more like one of us, the longer we are bonded.*

Scud. I knew Chet was right about delvers ignoring inhibitors—I’d seen it in the old video. That delver had attacked and destroyed the humans on Detritus, before we’d landed there. Despite all its protections.

Visibly concerned, Brade looked away, listening to someone at her side. She glanced at me, then vanished to deal with whatever had drawn her



attention.

“You said she has this in hand!” Alanik said from behind me.

“She does,” Arturo cried. “Don’t you?”

“Actually,” I said, lowering my gun and looking back at them, “yes. Tell those officials to show us the inhibitor. I just saw a cytonic projection from a *very* dangerous human. We might not have much time.”

That made the already-addled aliens cry out. “Not a *human*,” one of them said. “Please. They won’t come here, will they?”

“Never can tell with those humans,” Kimmalyyn said. “Best be quick and do what we say.”

The aliens did as they were told, and I smiled, thinking of Brade trying to run an operation against us on the wrong planet. Unfortunately, her appearance was still a big problem. She knew for certain we were trying something, and it wouldn’t be long before she realized she had the wrong place.

We needed to move faster. I had the aliens take us to the device, which was a large box installed in the corner of the small room.

“Open it,” Alanik told them.

“Open it?” the aliens said, looking to each other. “How? We...don’t have authorization to do that.”

Of course they didn’t—most people didn’t even know what was *inside* these boxes, despite using them to facilitate travel and communication all the time. That was the big secret.

We all shared a glance, and I felt foolish. How had I not considered this eventuality?

“Jorgen could open it with a mindblade,” Arturo said.

“Not with the inhibitor in place,” Alanik said. “Only approved people can use their powers here.”

“Powers?” the alien said. “Are you...um...?”

I raised my rifle to blast the lock off. But Arturo grabbed me by the arm. “Do that, and it will vanish.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Any interference with the boxes causes the contents to hyperjump away,” he said. “Haven’t you been paying attention? That’s how they keep control.”

Scud. I’d promised to save these slugs, not send them right back to their captors. I thought for a moment, and tried to puncture the inhibitor field again. It didn’t work. Why had it been possible moments ago, but not now? I reached out to Chet for an answer, but he seemed befuddled too.

Scud. I was at a loss. “Can we take it with us?”

“Uh,” the aliens said. “They told us that if we moved it after its installation we’d break it...”

“Let us try,” Kimmalyn said, kneeling down by the box. She scooped her slug out of its sling at her side and placed it on the box.

“Cytonics don’t work,” Arturo warned.

“I know,” Kimmalyn said. “But there are probably *two* slugs in there. An inhibitor slug and a hyperslug. One to teleport the other away, in the event the box is opened. A little like how we’re training ours to protect us if one of our ships goes down.

“But they’re trained using fear. Anger. Pain. They jump away as a response to danger. FM has shown us the opposite works better. So maybe we can persuade these two to react differently.” She petted her slug, Happy, one of the yellow-and-blue ones. He started fluting softly. Then more encouragingly.

I still felt a little...jealous how they’d befriended and trained all these slugs during my absence. FM had been at the forefront of that, with Rig. In opposition to Jorgen, whose logical nature made him see the slugs primarily as tools.

I suddenly felt guilty for not inviting FM on this mission. She would have liked the chance to help these slugs. I’d always viewed her as a tad distant, but I’d seen a different side of her this last week. And she’d trained the other slugs well.

Kimmalyn cooed softly to Happy—who in turn fluted comfortingly at the box. After a few tense moments, Kimmalyn turned and nodded to me.

Taking a deep breath, I shot the lock off the box. The alien guides cringed down, though I was using energy rounds, which didn't ricochet—they were in no danger. We opened the box gently, and found two frightened slugs inside. Safe. Not teleported away.

Kimmalyn scooped them up, one in each arm, and nodded to us. Stroking the one that was colored blue and green, she calmed them both. “The first inhibitor is down,” she said.

“But *why* are we bringing these down?” the lead alien said. “I don't understand!”

“They've been corrupted,” Alanik said. “By the enemy on the other side of your portal. That's why you can't get shipments through.”

“Oh,” the alien said, still seeming uncertain—but it was a good enough lie. I nodded to Alanik, who smiled back and even winked. I assumed that might mean the same sort of thing to her species as it did to mine.

With the aliens, we quickly flew on the platform to the main inhibitor station, located in one of their command towers. Rather than breaking in through the wall this time, we were escorted in as honored guests. Kimmalyn worked her magic and got the two slugs there out as well, and just like that my cytonic senses returned.

“Our inhibitor is up,” Arturo said, petting his green-and-blue slug, Rodeo, riding in his sling. “Location secure.”

“Scud,” I said, relaxing. “That feels a *ton* better. No longer like I have a gun to my head.”

The lead alien was watching us. “Um...” He looked closer at us, then started fidgeting. “You're...not from command, are you? You're...you're...!”

“Freedom fighters,” Kimmalyn said, lightly putting a handgun to his head. “And yes, we're human. Don't worry though. We don't actually *eat* the people we kill. We just build sculptures out of their body parts.”

The creature fainted.

“Oh,” she said. “Too much? Did they not want to know about the sculpture part?” She said it lightly, but had her gun trained on the others.

*I have your friends*, I sent to that distant commslug. But I found I couldn't reach her anymore. The communication had been authorized initially, but now it was blocked and I had no idea how to contact her again.

"What do you want?" the second in command said, drawing my attention back to the problem at hand.

"The portal," I said. "Take us to the nowhere portal."

The next trip happened in a far different manner from the previous two. We put up shields along the sides of the platform for privacy, and held the officials at gunpoint after we stopped one of them—the junior communications officer—from trying to make a stealthy emergency call.

It was eerie, flying through town, feigning calm, passing people on rooftop picnics or hurrying to jobs. At that moment I felt a lot of what Jorgan had to be, as I held my gun at the ready, fully prepared to shoot. You never pointed your weapon at someone if you weren't prepared for that. If something went wrong, there was a chance I'd have to kill these poor people.

I hated the situation. More, I hated Winzik and Brade for forcing me into it. As we flew there, my rifle trained on an innocent person, I felt a pain well up inside of me. A deep, nerve-shattering agony over the sorry, circular state of life. We were oppressed, so we felt we had to hit back hard enough to free ourselves of that oppression, which would in turn lead to them fighting back even harder.

It was a pain that whispered nothing could ever be right, or beautiful, or even *normal* again. That everything was inevitably ruined in every conceivable way, and all of my efforts were the emotional equivalent of trying to hold a friend's intestines in as they died from a mortar shell blast.

The flying platform began to shake. The air vibrated, like from distant war drums. Sections of the railing vanished, and chunks of slag appeared around us—bits of melted metal, dropping and snapping against the floor.

I knew what those were. Pieces of Nedd's ship, picked up and latched onto by my broken mind when he was nearly killed.

Oh, scud. I was hyperventilating.

I was a weapon. It was okay. I was a weapon.

No need for this. No need...to feel...

I fell to my knees, gun tumbling from my fingers. Kimmalyn dropped beside me immediately, wrapping her arms around me.

But that was meaningless. I didn't need to be held.

I needed...

I needed...

I...

I pulled in tight and let her hold me. As if, by her effort alone, she could keep the universe from cracking in two.

I'd been lying to myself. It was getting worse. And I knew, deep within, that if I continued on this path I was going to get everyone near me killed.

Like before, this fit eventually subsided. It took longer—excruciating minutes during which I had to *forcibly* hold myself down, lest everything and everyone nearby suddenly be flung into the nowhere. I felt a buzzing at my mind—the slugs trying to get in—but I forced them away. I couldn't let this consume them too.

As it finally calmed, I looked up at the others.

The aliens were huddled by the side of the ship, strange shell-like eyelids closed as they trembled. Kimmalyn still held me, while Alanik kept guns fixed on the enemy. Arturo had gathered up most of the frightened slugs like terrified puppies.

Silence. I huddled there, then—with trembling fingers—reached for my gun and made certain the safety was on. Still shaking, I nodded to Kimmalyn, who released me. I struggled to my feet and grabbed the railing.

"So," Arturo said. "We...continue?"

"We have to," Alanik said. "The enemy is alerted. Either we finish this mission, or we go back to command having ruined any chances of them executing their planned mission."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. There was no telling what the aliens thought of our antics, other than that they were obviously terrified. That was fine. It got us through a large set of cargo bay doors, into a warehouse that was mostly empty—though we had them give an evacuation order anyway. I could see where the acclivity stone had once been piled:

large swaths of ground with painted square outlines for stock to be placed. It was all empty.

Closing this portal with the help of the Broadsiders really *had* achieved something. It was a proof of concept showing that shutting down the other portals would work as we hoped. I walked unsteadily to the large portal, which dominated most of the far wall of the warehouse.

“It’s locked,” the lead alien said—he’d recovered from fainting by this point. “It’s been locked for two weeks.”

“I know,” I said, hand on the stone. “I was one of the people who locked it. How large is your defense force here? How many fighters?”

He only answered after Kimmalyn nudged him with a rifle. Not because he was resistant to us, but because he still seemed so scared.

“Fifteen fighters,” he said.

“Send authorization for them to be moved,” I directed. “By us. No questions asked.”

We let him use a data terminal under close supervision to send that exact message. The others scrutinized the message several times, but this guy was so frightened, I didn’t think we had anything to worry about.

“Alanik, Arturo,” I said, once the message was sent, “looks like this warehouse is out of cargo. Leaves plenty of space for some fighters. Want to go start bringing them in? Grab one each, and fly in through those cargo doors?”

“We’re stealing their fleet?” Arturo asked. “We came here for fifteen fighters?”

“No,” I said. “They’re bargaining chips. How do I communicate with the people on the other side of this?”

Kimmalyn nudged the lead alien again. “You don’t,” he said. “They’ve shut off our ability to do that.”

“Is that so,” I whispered, closing my eyes. Reaching into the portal with my mind. It was locked, as I’d sensed so many times from the other side. Like opening a door between two adjoining rooms, I unlocked this side—but the other side was still closed. But radiation or something leaked

through. We knew that because an increased number of cytonics were born in the area around nowhere portals.

And fortunately, I had someone on the inside.

*M-Bot, I thought, you still in there?*

*I am, he replied. What did you just do a few minutes ago? Everything went crazy in here.*

*I went crazy out here, I replied. But right now, I need to talk to Peg. Can you find her?*

*She's out in the belt, he sent me. I'm in the center, the true nowhere. I might be able to help you reach her though.*

*Good enough, I thought, letting M-Bot act like an operator. I reached through him, much as—I suspected—machinery reached through hyperslugs to facilitate communication. Using his strength, I quested out and found her mind, on the other side of this doorway.*

*Peg, I said in her mind.*

She responded with shock. I wasn't good enough with my powers to read the thoughts of a non-cytonic yet. Jorgen had mentioned he could do it, but everyone had talents in different areas.

Hopefully this would do.

*It's me, Spin, I sent her. I need you to unlock the portal.*

Skepticism. I could sense that much from her. She thought this was a trap.

*It's me. I lost the mulun you gave me, Peg. But I did get out of the nowhere. I left Shiver with a promise, and I intend to keep it. I need you to open the portal for me. Then maybe, once this is all done, I can taste those seven fruits of contentment you talk about.*

I hoped that referencing our final conversations would be enough. I hovered at the side of her mind, watching her work through the implications—the potential costs, the potential gains. Finally, she projected a thought. I couldn't hear the specifics but...she wanted to know...

*Oh! We talked about life, I sent her. We were alone together in the garden by your tree. Right after you gave me the mulun. I asked why a*

*people like you, who seemed so aggressive, would grow trees. And you told me it was about life.*

That seemed enough for her. A short time later, I felt the gateway unlock. Light spilled over me as the stone glowed white, then vanished, becoming a large glowing field.

I didn't dare go through, not when my powers were acting so strangely. So, hoping I'd be forgiven, I pulled Peg through to our side.

She appeared a moment later, forming as if from light. A tall tenasi—a reptilian species with wide hands they held out before themselves, balancing with a large tail. A snout and teeth reminiscent of something from Earth's very ancient past. She looked at me, then at the gathered soldiers behind me—and the three aliens we held at gunpoint—and gave a loud, barking laugh and grabbed me in a hug.

Kimmalyn immediately sighted on Peg with her rifle. I waved a warning hand, panicked, as the hug just about crushed me. Fortunately, Kimmalyn didn't fire.

"Spin!" Peg said. "Words! You *did* it! Here, I thought it would be years before I heard from you. I've barely had time to start planting, and here you are growing *fantads* and pulling me into..." She trailed off, looking around. "Pulling me into the somewhere."

She let go of me, seeming awed. It had been over twenty years for her, spent in exile. Betrayed by the Superiority.

"I'm out," she whispered. Then she looked at me again. "What have you done?"

"It's temporary for now, I'm afraid," I explained. "Peg, this is my flight. My friends." I waved toward the others.

"The family you were so, *so* eager to get back to?" she said. "Words. I hope you all know what she left behind. We offered her paradise."

"So...that's great," Arturo said. "But, Spin, timing? How is rescuing this...person going to help us?"

"This isn't a rescue," I explained. "Peg isn't interested in leaving the nowhere, I don't think."



The large pirate shook her head. “The belt is my home. Though there are many at Surehold who would love the chance to come back through.” She focused again on the captive aliens. “Temporary, you said? What are you up to?”

Behind us, Alanik and Arturo arrived through the front cargo doors with a starfighter each—Superiority interceptors, modern design. Not bad ships. Peg eyed them.

“I have fifteen of those,” I said to her, “for you. As payment for hiring the Broadsiders.”

“Hiring us to do what?” Peg said.

I smiled, pulling out my datapad and bringing up the display of the locations of the other four Superiority mining stations in the nowhere. “Nothing you wouldn’t want to do anyway, Peg.”

# 15

**W**e arrived back at Platform Prime six hours later, hyperjumping into the airspace above Detritus and flying in formation. And my cockpit was even more cramped than normal when we did.

Because I'd brought back two new pilots. In the shape of two large crystals, each roughly the size of a flight helmet.

"Is this it?" Shiver asked, her voice a crystalline peal vibrating from her core. "Is this your home?"

"Yes," I said. "You can't see it?" I'd never quite figured out how a chunk of crystal—a creature known as a resonant—could see.

"I require instruments to see through a vacuum," Shiver explained. "All I can see right now is the cockpit."

"Currently, Shiver," Hesho said, describing it as we got docking permissions, "we're approaching a large space station—flat, and shaped kind of like a large rectangle—that hovers in orbit around the planet Detritus. It is one of hundreds that orbit the planet—the place where Spensa was born, and the place that is now our home."

At that word, the second of the two resonants—Dlilllizzzz—projected some thoughts. She was cytonic, and had fared poorly during her time in the nowhere, growing quiet, withdrawn, even mentally broken. But today she projected images of happiness, rest, and satisfaction to me.

"Home," she said, the word vibrating from her core, from just behind my seat.

"Home!" Doomslug fluted.

“She’s feeling better!” Shiver said. “Dlilllizzzz is already feeling better! I resonate with satisfaction, Spensa. Coming to the somewhere *is* what she’s needed, as I always thought.”

I didn’t say anything, as I wasn’t so certain as Shiver. Dlilllizzzz had communicated like this with me before. Still, the two resonants had long wanted to escape the nowhere, and so I’d decided to make good on my promise. Maksim—another good friend from the other side—had opted to stay for now. Peg and her team were going to need every ship they had for the task I’d given them. Fortunately, they had a few extra pilots to take over Shiver’s and Dlilllizzzz’s ships.

“If Dlilllizzzz wants to go straight home to your caverns,” I said, “I’m sure we can find a ship to take the two of you back to your planet.”

“No, no,” Shiver said. “If we go home right away, that will only alert the authorities who banished us to the nowhere in the first place. Perhaps sometime in the future—but for now, we don’t want to be a burden. I am certain we can find something to do.”

It took a little longer than normal to be contacted by the flight deck as we waited to land. Finally, Hill—one of the flight operators—called us. “Sorry for the delay, Skyward Flight,” he said. “Admiral Weight wanted to be here to greet you when you returned from your secret mission. He’s on his way.”

Secret mission, eh? I steeled myself, but passed the time by reaching out cytonically to the ship hovering next to mine. Kimmalyn’s ship, which carried the rescued slugs.

*You have a friend,* I sent to that slug. *She wanted me to save you. Can you contact her?*

One of the newly rescued hyperslugs replied with impressions of many slugs in cages, of a dark and frightening place. Of thousands upon thousands of thoughts bombarding them, shoving against one another, being sorted and sent out.

*The communications hub,* I sent. *Yes, I know.* Though the awful sensation was stronger than I’d realized, I did know about this place. *How can I reach her?*

Sorrow followed. The slug didn't know how. The commslug reached out to others sometimes to comfort them in their captivity, but only when she was scheduled to contact the supply depot for another reason. It was like...she smuggled them empathy along with the data stream she was required to send.

Scud. I didn't know how the communications hub worked, only that through some mechanical means, the Superiority could force commslugs into slavery, allowing the planets to talk to one another. And I realized we'd never rescued a commslug. Apparently they were kept under even tighter wraps than the hyperslugs who teleported ships.

That made some sense; these were the only ones that could work remotely. So why not keep them all in one secure place? Again, the Superiority proved its paranoia and willingness to rely on a few highly important facilities.

I needed to find a way to get to that slug. I'd promised her I would—but it might take until the Superiority itself was dismantled. So I put the problem aside for now. *Any update from Peg?* I sent to M-Bot, hopeful as I waited in my cockpit.

*Not yet,* he replied.

We'd waited as long as we could for her to proceed before returning to Detritus. That, however, had obviously given Jorgen plenty of time to find out what we'd done. We finally got permission to land, and I led the ships into the hangar we'd left hours ago.

I immediately spotted Jorgen in the long window overlooking the flight deck. He stood in a brilliant white uniform, hands clasped behind his back, medals shining on his breast. Face like stone.

Yeah. I deserved that.

As we climbed from our ships, I asked the others to take the two resonants and show them around the place, then see if we could get them quarters. I told the team that I would talk to Jorgen.

He didn't move to stop them as they scampered away. I walked up to the window, and though I didn't hear him bark the command, I could see

the technicians inside the room flooding out the back doors. Jorgen remained standing in place. Waiting.

Well, I'd picked this fight. I would approach it with a warrior's dignity. I used the side door, stepping into the ops room—which was now empty, save for Jorgen. I strode right up to him, then waited for my dressing down.

Silence. He just stared out at our ships. Giving me time to sweat—a time-tested tool in the commander's toolbox.

I let the silence hang. I was confident I'd done what needed to be done.

"I thought I knew what it would cost," Jorgen finally said. He rested a gloved hand on the glass. "That's why I fought it."

"...Sir?" I asked.

"I thought that maybe if I flew well enough," he continued, "they'd let me remain a pilot. Let me stay on that side of the glass. Smell the engines, feel the hum of the ship, hear the chatter of my friends. Then...I was *needed*." He closed his eyes. "I figured I could escape any order that tried to *force* me out of the cockpit—but I was wrong. Because I eventually got one I couldn't ignore. From my own conscience."

He opened his eyes and looked at me, finally. "So here I am. On this side of the glass. Maybe forever. It ripped me apart to walk away from my ship, knowing that—by taking command—I was giving up something I loved. I didn't fully understand though. I didn't realize I'd stop being one of you, and would become the thing you resent."

"We don't resent you, Jorgen."

"You do, and you always have," he said. "I was 'Jerkface' from the start. But at least I was with you. I was *one* of you, even if I was the one you grumbled about." He sighed. "I knew I was giving up my dreams of flying. I didn't know I was giving up my friends too."

Scud. This was fighting *dirty*. I was supposed to be the one who did that.

"Jorgen," I said, stepping closer. "I didn't mean to—"

"Do you understand what it does to my authority when *you*, of all people, disobey me?" he snapped. "When you treat these bars on my

shoulders like they aren't worth the cloth they're made of? You *undermine* me, Spensa. From the *first day we met*, you've always undermined me."

I fell silent. He...he was hurting. I could *feel* it radiating from him like heat from a forge.

"I've tried so hard to ignore it," he said. "I know your background; I know how you were treated because of your father. I know you have a problem with authority, and I try not to take it personally. But *damn you*, Spensa. Can't you at least *try* to show some respect? If not for my position, then for *me*? You come to my rooms, treat me like someone you love, then you do *this*? How am I supposed to react? What do you want from me?"

"I did this *for you*," I said. "I saw how the decisions were tearing you apart, and I wanted to protect you."

"You don't get to make that choice!" he shouted, waving a hand at the ships. "That's what military discipline is *all about*. Come and *tell* me if there's a problem, *talk* to me about it. Don't hijack my most decorated pilots and go off on a scudding rogue mission! Don't put me in a position where I have to either discipline my friends or accept that I have no authority!"

"They insisted on coming," I said. "I didn't want—"

"Is that relevant?" he demanded. "You did it, even if you didn't want to!"

"And you went against Stoff's authority in taking command!" I shouted back at him. "Because you felt like you had to! Well, I felt I had to do this."

He put his hand to his face, trying to wipe off some of the sweat, and turned away from me. Looking out at the ships again. "The enemy has reinforced every strategic position," he said. "All of the supply depots except the one you struck have been protected with dozens of ships—and likely an equal number of inhibitors. We'll never attack them successfully now. I've called off the strike."

"You won't need it anyway," I said.

He narrowed his eyes, his face reflected faintly in the glass in front of him. "What did you do?"

“I contacted the Broadsiders,” I said. “The pirates on the other side of those portals. For a small payment—ships we stole—they agreed to attack the mining installations from the other side. If my guess is right, Winzik will have left the installations vulnerable on that side, bringing ships through to our side to reinforce his position.

“If Peg and her teams lock the portals from the *other* side, then no acclivity stone can come through. It’s just as effective as destroying the installations on this side, but won’t require nearly as many resources from us. Or as much death. The mining stations on the other side will give in easily—they’re not soldiers. They’re mostly prisoners. With some careful work from Peg, I’m sure they’ll fold quickly. Without loss of life.”

“And you didn’t suggest this to me because...?”

“Because you’d have found it too risky,” I said. “You told me we couldn’t rely on a group of pirates led by a former Superiority officer! If I’d told you my plan, you’d have rejected it and insisted on attacking the installations, blowing them up, cities and all, to be safe. And it would have ripped you apart, Jorgen.”

“And isn’t that my choice to make? What’s the point of having leaders, a chain of command, if you just *ignore* it when convenient?”

I didn’t respond. Because...he was right. I’d always had this problem. I’d always dreamed of being a warrior; being a soldier was something else entirely.

Then again, the military complex hadn’t given me much reason to put my faith in it. Not even with someone I cared about in charge.

“You really believe you can trust them?” Jorgen asked softly. “That they won’t sell us out?”

“I know it for a fact,” I said.

“And will it work?” he asked. “These pirates of yours...they can execute a large-scale raid like this?”

“We should know soon enough,” I said. “Traveling takes a while in the belt, as they can’t hyperjump. But the other mining installations are closer than I’d thought. It’s odd; I always wondered why they hadn’t been spotted.

Surehold is a massive operation; Peg and the others *should* have had some understanding of where the others were.”

“You didn’t expect them to be buried?”

That was one of the revelations of the data dump. Most of the mining operations in the nowhere were happening *inside* the floating chunks of stone. Vast mining centers were chewing through the insides of the fragments, sometimes towing new ones over and eating them from within as well. It was a clever way to avoid the attention—and the raids—that Surehold had drawn.

Unfortunately for the Superiority, that sort of operation *also* left the installations relatively unprotected once their location was known. I waited, nervous.

*No news yet, M-Bot sent me. Hopefully soon.*

She’d have to raid all four at once, I reminded myself. Which meant that she couldn’t attack until each of her four teams were in position. I didn’t want her to rush—though each minute of delay made me increasingly uncertain. Had Winzik realized what we were doing, and sent reinforcements through to protect the other side? Had something happened to Peg? There were still some pirates there who didn’t support her leadership.

“If it fails, I’ll take the blame,” I whispered to Jorgen. “You can tell everyone what I did.”

“That’s the problem,” he said, not looking at me as we waited. “I *can’t*. You’re too much of a symbol, Spensa. And too important to our fight. We need every cytonic. Even I have to spend part of my time during my command duties doing cytonic work.

“I’ve already let it be known that you and I planned this in secret, as we were worried about leaks among our allies. That will weaken our relations with them, but it lets you go without consequences, whatever happens.” He paused. “I didn’t do this because of my feelings. It’s actually in the handbook. Disciplining the upper ranks needs to be handled carefully, lest we risk alienating forces loyal to any given admiral.”

“I don’t want you to have to—”



“It’s done,” he snapped. “And it’s *my* decision to make. Unless you want to ignore even my ability to provide damage control for your recklessness.”

Scud. I’d have gotten angry at that tone if I hadn’t also been able to feel how much this was hurting him.

Maybe this had been a step too far. It was just so hard to keep it all in. Suddenly, the world began to vibrate. Another episode had come for me. I threw everything I had into stopping it, trying to control myself. I wasn’t a child, to have a tantrum.

But this episode didn’t progress like the previous ones. I was struck with a sudden overpowering sense of doom. I saw Jorgen dying beside me. I saw a shadow of him fall backward, bloodied, collapsing to the ground.

It was like the visions I’d seen when reading the memories of the ancient cytonics. I stifled a scream at the sight of him dead on the ground, blood pooling around his head, eyes staring sightless...

It was gone in a moment, but left me with an overpowering sense of loss and pain. It shook me deep into my core. And I was forced to wonder if it was some kind of terrible premonition.

Cytonics couldn’t see the future...could they?

I felt my own unbearable pain resonating to me as if from another time. Washing over me like a smothering darkness. I whimpered softly, teeth clenched.

Jorgen looked at me, and seemed concerned.

*Spensa?* M-Bot said. *It’s all right! Peg just sent word. All four installations have been claimed. It’s like you said! They barely had anyone defending them; they were depending on being impossible to find. So they each surrendered quickly. Only at one of them were any shots even fired! Um...Spensa?*

“It worked,” I said to Jorgen.

He let out a long sigh. “Well, thank the Saints for that, I suppose. I’ll let the others know; perhaps our allies will forgive us for our lack of trust, since the operation was successful.”

“And you?” I said, feeling a lingering sense of agony.

“That might take longer,” he said softly. “And it will depend on you. And how often you pull stunts like this. We can be a team, Spensa. Or I can just spend the rest of my life covering for you.”

He turned and left me then. I managed to wait until he was gone, then sank to my knees, rocked by the sight of him dead—ignoring M-Bot’s questions as I wrapped my arms around myself. Trying to hold on and keep from cracking further.

## 16

I went on a walk.

Growing up, that had been my go-to solution for any issue. There were endless caverns on Detritus, full of nooks to explore. I'd mapped as many as I could, enjoying the solitude, working through my anger at how society treated me. Maybe I should have focused a little more on what my anger was doing to me.

I liked to think that all of my problems had come from how I'd been treated when I was younger. The way people thought of my father, and the bullying they'd shown me in turn. Their prejudice had made a fighter of me from a young age. Yet even as a child, I'd often barreled forward—doing whatever I wanted, without bothering to think what it might cost my friends and family.

Walking had always helped. Today I tried to find the same solace as I walked Platform Prime, asking the illuminated hallways to allow the same meditative peace I'd once found in dusty darkness. There were some similarities. The tight enclosures felt like tunnels, and they made unexpected turns, with a variety of corners to explore.

On Detritus, sometimes I'd take a path only to discover a cavern covered with quartz, glittering in the dim light. Here, I instead discovered a room full of blinking lights of a dozen varieties. I even found a rat hiding in a corner. What did it live on up here? How had it even *gotten* here?

I left it alive, granting it a battlefield pardon, as one might a worthy foe. After all, this was either a rat from a population that had somehow survived for centuries up here—or it had managed to stow away on one of our ships.

It was the Spensa version of a rat, hiding out among the enemy and gathering their secrets.

The further I explored—entering areas of the platform that I hadn’t even known existed—the more wondrous I found it. A swimming pool. An observation room where you could stand over the planet and look down at its surface, as if you were hovering in the stratosphere. A room with dozens of tables...which looked like they were for *games*. The people who had lived here had played ping-pong, and billiards, and other Old Earth leisure activities that I’d only read about.

The ancient humans had made time for games, for frivolity, in ways we never had. For the first time in my life, I wondered what kind of world *my* children would grow up in.

Would I have children? I’d always assumed I’d end up dead in battle before that happened. I’d make a terrible mom, wouldn’t I?

*Spensa?* M-Bot said in my head as I rounded one of the ping-pong tables. I’d always preferred reading about baseball, where you used giant clubs instead of little paddles. *Can we...talk please?*

“Absolutely,” I said, glad for a distraction from my own troubles. “What’s on your mind?”

*Well, I think you know, but I should say...I’m not actually a ghost. I’m quite the opposite. I’m more alive than I ever was in the somewhere. Free from the constraints that forced me to think of myself as something false. Allowed to steer my own destiny. Capable of understanding, and starting to manage, my own emotions.*

“That sounds awesome,” I said. “You’ve come a long way. And I don’t know if I thanked you properly for sacrificing yourself for me.”

*It turned out to be less of a sacrifice, and more of an ascension.*

“Still,” I said. “You didn’t know what would happen, and you did it anyway. After being angry at me for weeks for abandoning you, when it came time, *you* saved me.”

*I...did, didn’t I? That sounds heroic, doesn’t it?*

“Scud, yes.”

*That’s terrifying, Spensa.*

“Wait. Terrifying?” I wandered out of the game room, back into a hallway.

*Yes, terrifying. Spensa, I am no longer bound by programming. I no longer have an excuse. Before, I did what I was designed to do. Now, I’ve acknowledged my free will. That means I have to worry about things I never did before. Things like morality.*

“I think you’ll do fine,” I said. “The people who brood about their moral compass in stories tend to be the strongest at making decisions.”

*Really?*

“Yup. Well, them and the tortured antiheroes, but I don’t think that’s you. You’re a little too...”

*Noble?*

“Bubbly,” I said. “But also noble. Yeah, I probably should have just said noble. You’re a good person, M-Bot.”

*Person. I’m...a person. That’s strange when I don’t even have a body. Is it wrong that I miss it? I couldn’t control it, and the circuitry was literally designed to imprison me. But that ship was me. Mine. I miss it.*

I tried not to feel guilty. I already had enough to feel bad about—remembering how I’d left him to be ripped apart, his ship dissected and then destroyed by the Superiority, wouldn’t help.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

*It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t rip me apart. See? I understand that and I feel it. But Spensa, I’m still worried. Because of morality. I feel like...like I need to be helping you. Protecting our friends. Doing what I can from in here.*

“Great!” I said. “That’s what I need you to do. You were a huge help with Peg. And you’re keeping an eye on the delvers.”

*Not much to watch. Something’s odd about them, Spensa. More odd, I mean. They’re emerging from hiding, and—while imitating one of them so they don’t know what I am—I’ve been able to listen in on a few things. They’ve been talking to Winzik and Brade again. It seems the deal between the delvers and the Superiority is still in force. A treaty.*

I nodded, feeling daunted, but this was no more than what I'd expected. The delvers were willing to work for Winzik in exchange for him promising to exterminate the cytonics—me in particular—and to move to using slugs alone for hyperjumping. I didn't know how Brade fit into that deal.

At any rate, if not for their timidity about me, Winzik would already have used them as a weapon against us. Worryingly, if the delvers were still talking to him, it might not be long before they decided to move. Regardless of their fear.

*The delvers are no longer willing to hide, M-Bot explained. I can feel them seething. Trembling with emotion.*

"Keep an eye on them," I said. "Let me know if you think they're about to move on from stewing about me to actually attacking us."

*I will. But...Spensa...do you mind me asking—why do you fight? Is it still for the chance to murder your enemies?*

"It was never about that, not really," I said. "It was about proving myself."

*You did that though. Didn't you?*

I supposed I had. Ever since I'd chosen to eject from my ship back in flight school, I hadn't worried if I was a coward or not. I'd proven myself—to myself.

Why did I fight now? "It's for the reasons you gave earlier. For my friends. For my people."

*And at the end of it...what do you want?*

"I don't know," I said. "I don't really think that far ahead."

*I do, and that's what worries me. Spensa, everything in my existence was pushing me toward that moment when I decided. When I went against programming, self-preservation, and reason to protect my friends. I came of age in that moment, Spensa.*

*Now...now that I'm the equivalent of an adult, shouldn't I want to do the right things? Shouldn't I enjoy what I'm doing, because it's the proper choice? The moral one?*

"You don't enjoy it?"

*No. I'll do it. But I'd rather be doing something else.*

“Collecting mushrooms?”

*Yes. Or other things. Does it really matter if it's not the thing I should be doing?*

“I suppose it doesn't,” I said. “But M-Bot, if it helps, I don't think most people *want* to do what's right. That's what makes doing the right thing noble. It's a conscious choice. A hard one. If it were easy, then why would we respect it so much?”

I'd never phrased it that way before, not even to myself. Simple though the concept was, it struck me powerfully right then. I nodded, trailing through the hallway, walking—without consciously realizing it—back toward the observation room with the glass floor. I found an odd sense striking me as I walked the hallway. A familiarity? Or maybe just a kinship.

When I'd first come to these platforms, I'd found their sterile corridors to be too clean, too slick, too...inorganic. I felt a little of that again now. But also something else.

“Huh,” I said, resting my hand on the corridor wall. “I'm actually growing to like this place. I would've thought I'd find it even *more* unnatural, after traveling the landscapes of the fragments.”

M-Bot didn't respond immediately, and I felt an unusual disconnect from him.

*M-Bot?* I sent.

*Sorry,* M-Bot said, *what was that? Something about liking the corridors now?*

“Yes. Are you all right?”

*Yup. Just processing something. But I'm not surprised you find that place more homey than you once did. You've been away, and returned. Humans are often nostalgic for the past. Plus they form bonds of familiarity with the oddest objects and sensations.*

“Says the robot who for some reason *loves* mushrooms,” I said.

*Hey, mushrooms are at least alive! And they're fascinating. So many varieties, growing in the harshest locations. Did you know some fungi can puppet the bodies of insects like zombies?*

“That’s hardcore,” I said. Who’d have thought *mushrooms* could be that cool?

*But back to you being strange, M-Bot said, maybe...maybe you just like those hallways because they remind you of a cockpit? And of flying with me.*

I loved that idea, though I didn’t think it was accurate. Still, it made me smile as I continued walking, rounding the corner and stepping into the room with the glass floor. This time though, it was occupied. A lanky young man with red hair lay on the floor, a bunch of schematics spread out around him—though he was lying face down and looking through the glass.

Rig jumped when he heard me, looking up—then relaxed when he saw it was just me. “Hey,” he said. “Hear you had an exciting day.”

“Yeah. Exciting.” I yawned. “Isn’t it morning, on standard schedule times? Shouldn’t you be at breakfast?”

“Hmmm?” he said, then checked his watch. “Eh, I don’t really care about schedules. I’ve been up all night anyway.”

“Rig,” I said, hands on my hips, “you spent *years* complaining when I woke you up—or kept you out—for one of my *brilliant* and *interesting* plans.”

“Fortunately, the windows here lead into a vacuum,” he noted. “So I don’t get woken up by you rapping on mine, convinced we need to go hunting for lost treasure in yet another empty cavern.”

“I eventually *found* treasure, I’ll have you know,” I said, folding my arms.

I expected M-Bot to pipe in at that. But he didn’t—and when I nudged him cytonically, he felt distant again. Was something going on with him?

“Anyway,” I continued, “I am offended by your suddenly deciding to stay up all night without me.”

He shrugged. “FM stays up late. So I’ve found myself doing it more and more...”

“Of course,” I said, walking over. Around Rig I felt...not immature, but more like my old self. I flopped down beside him on my back, ruffling a few of his schematics, and looked at the ceiling. Then I rolled over to look down like he was. Through the glass, toward Detritus below.



“Scud,” I whispered, “that’s disorienting.”

“I know, right?” Rig said, excited.

“I feel like I’m falling,” I said, staring down. “Like I’m plummeting toward the surface.”

“I feel like I’m floating,” he said. “Like I get to see everything, take it all in for once. Maybe understand it, rather than being afraid of it.”

“You’ve been doing a pretty good job of not being afraid of things lately,” I noted.

“It’s not that I’m not afraid,” he said. “It’s that...well, I’ve got a good support structure. That helps.”

Huh. That wasn’t how I would have put it. As a kid, I’d have said that courage destroys fear. Now, I’d have said that fear is what lets us be able to be courageous.

“I’m glad that it’s working with you and FM,” I said. “That you have a support structure. That...you’re no longer just that boy with the weird friend you can’t get rid of.”

“Oh please,” he said. “We both know that no one was pounding on my door, demanding my friendship. You didn’t scare people away from me, Spin. You befriended me when no one else paid me any attention.”

“Outcasts sticking together,” I said, staring down at the planet—which glowed under the enormous lights moving up here. I could see the shadows and strips of brightness they made, the lights leftover from a time when Detritus had grown more than dust and fungus.

“Rig,” I said softly, “how bad a friend am I?”

“You’re not—”

“Be straight with me, please. I...really hurt Jorgen today. I need to hear from someone I trust. How bad am I at this?”

“You’re not *bad* at being a friend,” Rig said, “you’re just hard to be friends with. That’s different.”

“How?”

“You try,” he said. “I know you do. You always looked out for me. Scud, I doubt you would normally have chosen the quiet, occasionally panicky guy to be your best friend. But I needed someone, and you saw

others picking on me, and...well, here we are. You're loyal, passionate, and inventive."

"But..."

"But you are really, *really* bad at seeing things from other people's viewpoints. You just go and do stuff, Spin, and believe everyone else would have done the same thing if they'd only thought of it and had the guts."

"Fair," I said. "I know I pushed you into flight school. But I can't see things as if I'm someone else. I'm me. Shockingly, I see things like *me*."

"It's a skill to practice, like any other," he said. "You love stories. Maybe ask yourself, what if the story weren't about *you* for a change? What if it were Jorgen's story? How would he feel about what you're doing?"

Scud, that hit me right in the gut. He made it sound so easy, and maybe for him it was.

But I'd done what *needed* to be done. For Jorgen. For Detritus. And given what was happening to me...the powers I was displaying...well, what if alienating Jorgen and the others was the only way to protect them?

It twisted me up inside. Made me start to tremble. Made me think of my friends dying, graphically, over and over in my mind. To escape those images, and another potential episode, I rolled back over and snatched one of the schematics.

"You know, Rodge," I said to him, "you're a weird guy."

"True, true."

"I walk in here to find you lying *face down* among a bunch of pieces of paper?"

"You immediately flopped down beside me."

"Practicing empathy," I said. "What *is* all of this?"

"Detritus has several enormous shipyards among these platforms," he said.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "I had a battle in one, remember?"

"Right, while it was crashing. Nedd's brothers..."

I nodded, though he couldn't see, as he was still face down. Yeah, he really was weird. Maybe we had always been destined to become friends.

“You think you can build me a ship with one of these fabrication plants?” I asked.

“Depends, really,” he said. “Do you have designs for what you’d want? And by that I mean accurate, detailed schematics created by an actual engineer? Not something hand-drawn on a scrap of paper, depicting a catapult for launching Stacy Leftwire into a furnace.”

I smiled. “I forgot about that.”

“I didn’t. You wrote it in blood.”

“Rat blood,” I agreed. “It makes a terrible ink. Kept congealing. Not sure how the old necromancers ever made use of it in their arcane tomes.”

“Can we change the topic?”

“I’ll get you schematics,” I said. “Real ones. They were in the data dump we stole.”

“Great,” he said. “I wanted to do some tests anyway. Been thinking, though, that we don’t really *need* more fighters. We have plenty for our trained pilots. Maybe we need something else.”

I myself wasn’t so certain we had all the fighters we needed. Now that we had a hyperslug ejection system for pilots, we might start chewing through ships faster. It was a mindset change. We’d always had ejection systems that worked in atmosphere, but the culture of the DDF had trained pilots to protect their ships—ostensibly harder to replace—over their own lives.

I often wondered how much that short-sightedness had cost us. We hadn’t acknowledged the importance of skilled veteran pilots. Half the reason my friends and I were in such high positions was the fact that we’d managed to *survive* long enough to actually get some useful combat experience.

I was about to explain to Rig what I wanted him to fabricate, when the door swung open and FM strode in. She was faintly flushed, tense. Still poised of course, but for FM this was the equivalent of being in a panic.

“What is it?” I said, immediately sitting up.

“Emergency conference called by command,” she said. “The enemy is doing something. I was looking for Rodge, but Jorgen will be glad you were

here too.”

I wasn’t so certain about that. Not today. But as Rig scrambled to gather his schematics, I stood up. “Do you know anything more?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Shutting down the enemy’s access to acclivity stone *really* got their attention.”

“And?”

“And,” she said, meeting my eyes, “they’re changing tactics. We can’t be certain; it’s probably too early to tell, but their troop movements indicate...well, they’ve realized they can’t win a long war as easily as they could have before. So instead...”

Instead? I frowned, trying to think what I would do in their situation. They would realize we were going to try to bleed them over time, but they still had vastly superior numbers. So in their place, I’d...

*Scud.*

# 17

“**A**ll-out assault,” Goro—one of the kitsen generals—said, hovering his platform over to a wall screen and gesturing at the footage we’d been able to gather from across the Superiority. Hyperslugs let us jump ground teams in to spy on the installations Cuna had identified for us.

“Again,” Goro said, hovering to another part of the wall screen, then pointing to a different image, “we aren’t *certain*, but this is what it looks like.”

“Makes sense, unfortunately,” Cobb said.

He still refused to sit at the table with us, instead taking an advisor’s seat by the wall. The pallor of his skin and bags under his eyes had me worried about him, but he did seem to be participating more. So maybe he was getting better.

“They understand our strategy,” Cobb continued. “Over time, if we destroy their military in little skirmishes, piece by piece, they could lose control.”

“Right now the Superiority is stable,” Cuna added from their spot at the table. “It’s large enough, and has enough momentum, that few of the common citizens will have noticed anything changing since the advent of Winzik’s reign. However, we are not *cathodis*.”

My translator pin, set to explain things like this, whispered it was a metaphor for an object that sits on a wall and watches the world pass, never moving. A little like the English phrase “We aren’t sheep.”

“Over time,” Cuna continued, “people will grow increasingly upset at the loss of democracy. They will see through Winzik’s rhetoric about

dangerous humans and delvers—and they will ask questions. If we’re destroying his military presence, the more...rambunctious of the lesser species might rebel against his rule. Even those of primary intelligence will begin to move against him.”

“Without his supply depots, Winzik has realized that a long-term engagement against us has grown more risky,” Goro agreed. He gestured toward more footage on the screen. “So, here we see him pulling security forces away from the planet Ooklar, and here, others away from the planet Zip!tak. Here he is calling in ships that were protecting important sublight shipping lanes in the dione twin system from piracy.

“They’re gathering. If he is aggressive in these redeployments, he can bring in some twenty-seven hundred fighters to support his primary fleet. About a third of those will have actual in-cockpit pilots, while the rest are remote drones. Worse, he has access to twenty to thirty capital ships: eight carriers, and twice as many destroyers.”

Scud. Those numbers...

Twenty-seven hundred fighters? Even with our allies, we had barely *three* hundred. Yes, a good chunk of theirs would be drones, which were much easier to face. But our force of three hundred included all of our newer recruits and trainees, who had barely any battle experience. And as always, we had no capital ships—though granted, Detritus itself was a giant moving battle station.

Most of our forces were raiders, the modern equivalent of cavalry. We’d survived so far by being fast, striking where Winzik didn’t expect, and—to be perfectly frank—exploiting the fact that he couldn’t devote much of his attention to us. He was busy establishing himself as galactic dictator.

This was coming to a head though. He couldn’t afford to let us keep picking at him. We’d served our purpose, giving him a boogeyman to use as “proof” he needed dictatorial authority. Now he would want a decisive battle where he destroyed us outright. If he couldn’t win the long war, that was his only other option.

Squash us fast. I should have *seen* this.

“Wait,” Rinakin said from his seat at the table, a confused expression on his pale violet face. “Won’t this risk rebellion? If Winzik moves all of his security forces away from his planets, won’t those planets turn against him?”

“Eventually, yes,” Cuna said. “This is a possible problem. But you must understand, we’re not...um...”

“Aggressive?” I asked.

“I was looking for a less charged term,” they said. “I’ve learned it might not be as accurate a word as I would have liked. But in this case, perhaps it will serve: we’re not aggressive.

“We aren’t *cathodis*, and will not just sit forever and be content with oppression. At the same time, my people—and those they lead—will try other methods first. Bills to enforce the law, motions in governing bodies, editorials in the media. Winzik will need his military forces then, if these movements gain strength, but he has likely seen—and rightly so—that he can spare the forces now. For a short time.”

“For just long enough to make slag out of us,” Jorgen said grimly.

“Did you...foresee this?” Rinakin asked, looking to Jorgen. “In your plan to starve him of acclivity stone?”

“This was poorly handled,” Goro said, hovering toward the group of other kitsen gathered on the tabletop. “Elder Itchika and I are greatly displeased to have been *cut out* of the decision to strike in secret against the enemy. Why weren’t we consulted about moving the timeframe up so quickly, or the decision to strike in the nowhere, instead of against the facilities in the somewhere as we’d decided?”

“How can we call this an alliance,” Cuna said, “if one of our members acts with such distrust toward everyone else?”

I sank down in my seat, sick to my stomach. Jorgen would never have moved up the attack without talking to our allies. His hotheaded star pilot, though, was another matter. Scud, I was such a fool.

Jorgen stood up and didn’t even glance at me. He’d shoulder this. As he so often suffered because of me. Everything I’d done seemed right, even in hindsight. Refurbishing M-Bot, running off to Starsight, staying in the

nowhere...even this action, which had achieved our goals with the mining facilities without loss of life.

Yet in each case, I'd left Jorgen to make excuses. To pick up the pieces. To figure out how to lead while I just did my thing. He was right about me. In that moment, I felt I didn't deserve to be in that seat—I didn't even deserve to be in the room.

"No, Rinakin," Jorgen said to them. "I didn't anticipate that this would happen. You're right—and Goro, you are right that we have acted brashly by not consulting you. We were wrong, and I beg your forgiveness.

"We're new to this. That's the problem, my friends. Too new. We are children, essentially, trying to fill adults' shoes for the first time. My people spent decades on the very edge of annihilation. Back then, we didn't take time to develop proper plans, because if we did we'd be dead before we could execute them.

"That same sense rules us still. That sense of panic, that sense that we need to act now, as soon as an opportunity arises, lest we lose our chance. We need to grow up. We need to learn and do better. But I only ask that you accept that we are not *trying* to alienate you. We're learning, all the time, and as fast as we can."

The others at the table considered his words, and I could see them softening. How did Jorgen always know the right things to say? How did he know when to be firm, and when to apologize? The others saw him shouldering the responsibility for what I'd done, and they accepted his apology.

"I suppose we can understand this," Goro said. "None of us have ever fought a *truly* galactic war. Even on my homeworld, it has been decades since a real war has happened; we have known only skirmishes."

"You can be forgiven," Rinakin agreed, "for not anticipating what would happen in a war on this scale. We are *all* new to this, and the plan with the mining stations looked good to us all; we would not be nearly so upset if we'd simply been *told* when you decided to move the timetable up."



“We promise,” Jorgen said, finally looking at me. “No more surprises. We *will* grow up, my friends.”

A platform hovered up beside Goro’s. Itchika, the aged kitsen with white on her snout, still wore her formal robes. She was an elected official, I’d come to understand. Not like an empress—they’d moved beyond that—but still something of a voice for the old ways.

“We too appreciate your honesty, Admiral,” she said to Jorgen. “But there is a beast we must consume, as my people say. A topic that must be addressed. Our planet, Evershore, is exposed. As is ReDawn, the homeworld of our allies, the UrDail. Your people, however, have a mobile planet—with a defensive shell around it. You can afford brashness, for if the enemy comes in force, you can escape. We cannot. Our people could be annihilated.”

The conference room fell silent, and I felt even more sick. Because this point also was true. I wasn’t used to the idea of our people being free, like Jorgen had explained, but I didn’t believe that was what had driven me to act. That didn’t change the fact that yes—if the Superiority came in force against us, we could escape. Detritus being mobile meant that our people were actually more free than any other.

“We couldn’t escape forever,” Jorgen said. “Winzik cannot allow us to continue as a threat to his rule. Besides, we wouldn’t just leave you.”

Rinakin tapped the table softly, perhaps his version of clearing his throat to draw attention. “No one is accusing you of cowardice, Admiral. But if it came down to your people or ours, surely you would escape. It is a simple truth. I say this not as an accusation, but as a statement we should acknowledge. Detritus is not in the same position as the rest of us.”

“Besides,” Cuna noted, “you’re...well, you’re *humans*. You’re used to living with destruction and war.”

Remarkably, the UrDail and the kitsen seemed to agree, unfair though the statement was. I didn’t think humans were *naturally* more aggressive. We’d just been...I didn’t know how to describe it...

A soft click sounded from the side of the room. Then a quiet groan as somebody stood up. A short somebody, bowed by age. Gran-Gran?

Another click echoed in the conference room as she stepped forward along the table. The way she walked—frail, but determined—somehow conveyed the contradiction at the core of Gran-Gran’s soul. An aged woman, weak of frame, yet bearing power and authority.

On one hand, she was a nobody. An old woman, outcast for most of her life because of her son’s betrayal. Except even back then, people had stepped aside for her. Even then, they’d known and remembered. She wasn’t just Gran-Gran. She was Rebecca Nightshade. The last living woman who knew life among the stars. The last crewmember of the ship that had brought us here.

“Do you know,” she asked, “the story of the *Defiant*?” She turned, her eyes closed, yet seeming to address everyone in the room—kitsen, UrDail, human, and lone dione.

“We do not know your story, honored elder,” Hesho said softly behind his mask, from where he hovered near my seat. “But I would hear it, if you would offer it to me.”

Gran-Gran smiled and tilted her face upward, toward the stars, as she walked. “We are the people who disobeyed. We are the humans who *would not* go to war, the last time the tyrants who led our various peoples banded together and tried to conquer the galaxy. Those are the warriors under whom you UrDail suffered long ago.

“Well, those humans, they demanded that every battleworthy ship join the armada and support them in their foolish war. But we, we turned *away*. Some of us of Chinese descent, others Colombian, others American, others Scandinavian—and many scattered peoples between. We had previously traded together, traveled together, but on that day we truly became one.

“A wise soldier chooses her battlefield, and we did not want this one. We *rejected* the call to arms, and so the first people we defied were our own leaders. That is the soul of the *Defiant*. It is not just that we fight, my friends. It is that we *choose when* to fight. We will not be forced—not by tide nor tyrant—to raise arms in a battle we do not support.” She opened her eyes, milky white, and looked around the room in strength. “But once we

do fight—once you have convinced us the cause is just—we do *not back down*.”

She stopped near the kitsen platforms. There, Gran-Gran nodded, chin still high. “We will not abandon you, my friends. I, the last of the *Defiant*’s crew, *swear it*. If you fall, we shall join you, so that together we may curse the fire and ash that sear our flesh from our bones. Dead, but not broken. If we instead choose to run, as my ancestors did, then we will only do so if we can bring you with us. For though we are not one people, as we unite together, we become sisters in arms. You do *not fight alone*.”

Though I’d heard this story of our origins many times before, it still brought a tear to my eyes. Gran-Gran’s words were nearly enough to pull me out of my gloom. And, although she had a uniquely Nightshade way of phrasing things, the speech had a positive effect on our allies. The kitsen stood down, accepting this promise. The others seemed comforted and calmed.

Another Spensa crisis averted. Scud, this speech wouldn’t have been needed if I hadn’t made everyone panic about humans acting erratically. The glow of hearing Gran-Gran speak faded, and the weight of my mistakes came crashing back down on me.

Jorgen thanked Gran-Gran, then addressed the table. “We can adapt to the enemy’s new tactics,” he said. “Fortunately, it will take Winzik some time to prepare his forces. I suggest that we meet with our various strategic experts, go over the intel we’ve gathered, then reconvene tonight. Twenty hundred local time, to share ideas?”

The others agreed. The meeting began to break apart, and I fled through the doors, ignoring Kimmalyn’s suggestion that we grab breakfast together. I didn’t want to argue again with Jorgen, and I didn’t want to face my friends. I wanted to be alone.

I was more and more certain that was where I belonged.

## 18

I went straight to bed and slept fitfully, but at least there were no strange nightmares or cytonic visions. Just restless turning around in my bunk, drifting in and out.

I'd been exhausted after that midnight mission, so it was well past midday when I rose. I immediately went for a long PT session. Treadmill, stretching, weights. I'd hoped that the familiar routine, and working my body, would ease my sense of dread and anxiety. But not today. My subconscious mind knew I was trying to distract it, and was having none of that nonsense.

After a shower and food, I dealt with my messages on the wall screen in my rooms and waited for an invitation to that planning meeting Jorgen had mentioned. Always before, I'd just shown up to meetings—Jorgen didn't always send me a specific invitation, because my attendance was expected. And so, as the time approached, I didn't know for certain if I had been excluded.

I leaned back in my bunk, scratching Doomslug, who had her own little bed beside mine. She sensed my mood, and didn't say anything.

Knowing Hesho, he was probably standing guard outside my door. He'd taken to doing that most days; part of his self-imposed duty as the Masked Exile bodyguard. I could have chatted with him, but I didn't want to talk to anyone. I wanted to be alone.

When you're in that kind of mood, it's awkward to have friends who can literally pop inside your head.

*Hey, M-Bot said. Something is up with the delvers. They're growing agitated.*

"Are you in danger?" I asked.

*Probably. But I've been in danger the entire time, so who knows? They'll destroy me if they can, but they're obviously afraid of you. Maybe even of me, a little. Wish I knew why.*

"I know some of it," I said, lying in my bunk, staring at the ceiling. "After you sacrificed yourself and let me escape into the lightburst, they tried to...I don't know. Crush me? Overwhelm me? Shred my soul.

"Combining with Chet, though, showed me something. He was in pain, and my life experience allowed him to overcome it. In turn, *I* needed an awareness of the nowhere—and the delvers—which he could provide. So when the delvers touched me, they were subjected to pain."

*That pain, M-Bot said. That's their weakness. They fled into the lightburst to escape the pain of loss, right?*

As the delvers had evolved from an AI to a person, they'd been unable to cope with the death of a man they'd loved. They'd sealed away their memories and found refuge where time had no meaning. Where they would never have to grow, never again have to suffer the pain of losing something—or someone—they loved. Where nothing would ever change.

Except when people from the somewhere passed through. Except when cytonics, or slugs, opened pathways to our dimension—where time, space, and *change* were inevitable parts of life. It hurt them.

"When they tried to destroy me, that required coming in contact with me," I explained. "That hurt them too much. Because I'm part of the somewhere, I think?"

*More than that, I'd guess, M-Bot said. They hid their memories away, but didn't eliminate them entirely. You knowing their secrets cuts through their layers of protections, and exposes that pain again. When you touched them, you ripped away their masks—so to speak—bringing their memories to the forefront of their awareness again.*

Chet leaped at that statement. *That is key*, he thought.

“So...they could feel my ability to understand what they were. That was *painful* to them...”

*You knew what they were hiding, M-Bot said. They couldn't pretend when you were there. You forced them to remember, and that memory would hurt them too much to bear. They had to pull back.*

“So all we need to do now,” I said, “is find a way to expose the delvers fully to their pain. Remove the barrier they've put in place to hold back their memories. If we do that...”

*It will destroy them, M-Bot said. Because in the nowhere, nothing changes. If you afflict them with that immense pain, then leave, they'll never escape it. They'll be trapped forever. Unable to do anything, except perhaps cease to exist.*

Chet, inside my soul, felt sorrow at that. What did I feel? Resignation? I had worked so hard to protect the workers at the supply depots, even though they were on the other side. What did I feel about the delvers?

It was, I decided, too complicated to sort out. Without Chet, I'd have had no qualms. But he gave me a different perspective. “That sounds terrible,” I said.

*Yes, but it's a plan, finally, M-Bot said. Some way, at long last, of dealing with them—maybe permanently. Scud, Spensa. It feels good to have a plan.*

“Well, I often have plans,” I said. “That's not the problem. The problem is that I don't often give them enough time, or give others a chance to weigh in.”

*So...*

“So we take it slowly in this instance,” I said. “And don't try anything until we've thought it through and done more research. You think you can sneak in among them and find out if our theory is right? Maybe see if you can spot a way to restore their pain to them?”

*Of course. I'm not just a ghost, I'm a stealth ghost. I can do it. I'll find the answers.*

“Good.”

*And Spensa? Once we do this—once we find out how to defeat the delvers, and keep the Superiority from destroying Detritus—then...then we get what we want. That's how it is in the stories, right?*

“Yeah,” I lied. “Yeah. That’s what happens in the stories, M-Bot.”

*Good, good...* he said, his voice fading.

His withdrawal left me alone again, as I’d wanted. But that meant I went back to stewing about the meeting. Should I have gone? What did staying here accomplish? Was waiting for an invitation mature, or petulant?

I found myself reaching out with my senses, not on purpose, just kind of as an extension of my worries—and even my growing loneliness. So I shouldn’t have been surprised by what happened next. Brade appeared in my room, a phantom cytonic projection, her arms folded, her uniform crisp.

Before, I’d been able to hide from her. But the way my soul vibrated—resonating with the delver—had changed that. I didn’t have nearly as much control now.

“Scrud,” Brade said to me. “You have to be so loud? We’re trying to figure out the best way to murder you all.”

“You’re scared,” I snapped back at her. “You didn’t expect us to cut you off from your resources like we did. Now you’re desperate.”

“That *was* a cute trick,” she admitted.

I climbed out of bed and circled Brade, and she circled me, prowling warriors assessing each other. My hand trembled with the desire to grab the knife strapped to my leg and lunge for her.

It wouldn’t have done any good. The blades we fought with weren’t of steel. And unfortunately, she had proven stronger than I was at that sort of thing, even if I did have a delver powering my soul.

“I did want to say thank you,” Brade finally said.

“For?”

“For pushing Winzik and his generals into a corner,” she said. “They were so determined to fight a slow, wasting war. Now they’ll take the better path. A final grand confrontation. Our own Agincourt or Waterloo.” She strolled around me again. “I should have known, should have seen, what you were from the start. No UrDail would have had your bloodthirst. Your

willpower. Don't tell me you aren't *excited* for a final climactic confrontation."

"I'd rather one that didn't cost so much," I said. "Do we *need* to waste thousands of lives, Brade? When the outcome is inevitable and the Superiority is doomed?"

She stepped closer and studied me for a moment, then answered. "I see," she said. "You're getting weak. Losing the thirst. What's causing this pacifism in you, Spensa?"

"You never talked like this before," I said, still rounding her. "Back when we trained together, you talked about killing being a terrible thing—you said that you were a weapon trained from birth, kept captive by the Superiority by necessity. You seemed afraid of yourself and what you did. Not thrilled by the prospect of battle."

She smiled. "Perhaps knowing you awakened something."

"Or more likely," I said, "you were playing a role back then. Which is why you went to Winzik so eagerly once you knew what I really was. You know, I *actually* thought I could get through to you? I thought you were brainwashed."

"Honest mistake," Brade said. "Who would have expected a human to be so good at pretending to be what she wasn't? Remarkable, when you realize there were *two* of us doing it."

"So what about this, then?" I said, gesturing to her. "Posturing about the glory of battle. Another false face? Hoping I'll underestimate you?"

"More like trying to find common ground," she said, toying with a destructor holster on her hip.

I realized I knew a third Brade, the one I'd spied on from the nowhere. One who prowled like a leopard, watching Winzik with a calculating relaxation.

That seemed to be her true self. Not the cowed captive, not this bloodthirsty warrior. Instead, a crafty manipulator. More companion to Winzik than slave.

Scud, no *wonder* she'd betrayed me. I hadn't just been messing with *his* plans, but *hers*.



“The battle does intrigue me,” she said. “Do you know how many times our ancestors tried to conquer the galaxy? How long the humans spent proving themselves?”

“Tyrants,” I said. “Exactly like the Superiority.”

“Oh, come on,” Brade said, flopping down on a seat that appeared in the vision as she interacted with it. “You can’t have it both ways, Spensa. Either the battle is glorious and brilliant, or it’s a useless waste of lives. It’s getting tiresome to watch you vacillate.”

I didn’t rise to the gibe. I couldn’t help but see even this as calculated in some way. Yes, I was a little inconsistent—I *felt* inconsistent—but I was figuring things out. I could love stories of courage and admire the strength of warriors, without wanting to see innocent people dead.

Either way, I would have *absolutely* no qualms about ramming a knife through Brade’s eye, then *twisting*. Sometimes you had to feel bad pulling the trigger. Other times, a target presented herself with such utter contemptibility that guilt didn’t enter into the equation. A part of me was grateful to her for making that part easy.

“You want to get this over with?” Brade asked me.

“How?”

“You,” she said, pointing. “Me. Duel, in person, starfighter against starfighter.”

“What would that accomplish?” I asked.

“We’d find out which of us is better.”

“We know who’s better,” I said. “I beat you three out of four times in the delver maze.”

“What, back then?” Brade asked. “When *you* were trying to pretend you were some half-pacifist alien and *I* was pretending that I wasn’t so dangerous, so as to not scare the rest of you away? Scrud, that was so *annoying*.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, and didn’t buy it. Yes, she’d been legitimately frustrated during our sparring. Insubordinate. She hadn’t liked being there in those training sessions. She’d probably hated that assignment.

What reason would she have had to hold back? None. She had every reason to bolster the reputation of human soldiers, and no reason to pull punches. I was the better pilot.

Though a part of me *really* wanted to find out for certain.

“I’m not going to duel you for pride,” I said.

“Then do it for tactical advantage,” she said. “I’m Winzik’s strongest cytonic; you should see the pathetic collection of half-brained excuses he has otherwise. His people have spent centuries breeding the skill out of themselves, the idiots. Yes, they have the hyperdrives, but this is like refusing to oil your sidearm because you have a rifle.”

An apt metaphor. I wavered.

“If I kill you,” Brade said, “I’m denying your people their strongest weapon. If you kill me, same. Seems like we both have an interest in a good old-fashioned duel.” She narrowed her eyes. “I want it. Do you?”

“Yes,” I whispered, realizing I did. I wanted to slice that smile off her face *so badly*, then nail it to my wall as a trophy. I’d lost my desire to kill indiscriminately, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t still me.

“We meet alone,” Brade said. “Here.”

Coordinates forcibly entered my head, like an arrow pointing the way.

“Day after tomorrow,” she said. “Thirty-six Old Earth hours from now.”

I looked at my clock. “Shouldn’t it be thirty-nine and a half hours instead? Then it would be high noon.”

“How quaint,” Brade said. “I won’t tell my people—Winzik gives me a long leash these days. I can sneak away. You?”

I didn’t respond, but she seemed to read the eagerness in my expression, for she vanished a moment later. I was left feeling uncertain. I’d *just* gotten us into enormous trouble by running off on my own. But if I could kill Brade—or better, capture her—then we’d be in a much stronger tactical position. I knew how much Winzik relied on her for cytonic interventions. At the very least, I knew *I’d* be more safe. We wouldn’t have to worry about her popping in and spying on us.

I wavered before making a decision. I needed someone to talk to about this. Fortunately, one of the wisest people I knew was sitting outside my

door. Having tea.



## Kitsen Profile

Record DST230307

### Kitsen Nobility

Ceremonial Knife



Kitsen Mobility Platforms



15cm



### Kitsen Warrior



Ceremonial Mask



"The Darkling Hasek That Separates Sinister From Brave"

15cm



For an expanded summary of this illustration, go to [this page](#).

## 19

Hesho had arranged himself cross-legged on a little carpet mat. He didn't acknowledge me as I opened the door. Instead, he carefully bowed to his teapot, then raised it and poured a single cup of tea about a quarter full. He bowed to it, then sipped it quietly until it was gone. Finished, he picked up his mask—white with red stripes, in the shape of a fox's head—and affixed it back into place.

It had the air of ritual about it, so I hovered behind him, waiting until he spoke.

"It is a ceremony for the emperor," he explained. "Every *nanjan* day. The head of the household pours, taking the emperor's place. It is a representation of how everything flows from the emperor—all comfort, all needs, all life. I had never done it before from this position. I had poured for the heads of state, but the emperor does not drink, as he does not take from the people, only gives." He paused. "I used to believe that."

I settled down in the doorway as he turned around on his mat. As always, his voice was powerful and deep—a tremendous bass coming from something so small. Or maybe that was just my prejudice speaking. Why shouldn't something small produce deep sounds?

"You are troubled," he said to me.

"Am I ever not?" I said with a sigh.

"Wise," he said. "As the ocean waves are disturbed by constant turmoil, so is the life of one who lives to the full."

"I don't think I'm so much like waves, Hesho," I said, "as much as I am like a jug of something carbonated that's shaken up and down repeatedly."

He chuckled at that. "I enjoy the way you see the world, Spin. It makes me think that perhaps I should appreciate levity in more abundance."

"Uh, same? Only in reverse?" I sighed, sitting down against the doorframe and ignoring the pair of pilots from another flight who walked by. They gave us odd glances, but I was used to those. "I'm not sure I can even figure out what I want to ask at the moment. Want to talk about your problems?"

"It *would* help to receive advice," Hesho said. "You are growing more thoughtful, Spensa. This is an encouraging development."

Uh, sure. Really, I just didn't want to unload on him before I could process some more. But I would let him think I was becoming more mature.

"What does one do," he said to me, "when one realizes that one is a... burden?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I selfishly miss my old life," he said. "The instant obedience of everyone around me. The ability to control destiny and make decisions. And...I miss my friends. My wives, my family, my servants and colleagues. My cupbearer and my shieldbearer. My eldest daughter, who is a musician of the most blissful tones. I now have only recordings."

Scud, he had a family? Families? It made sense, but sometimes it was hard to remember. I saw my friends mostly as soldiers—doing soldier things.

"Then go back to them," I said. "You can still fly with me if you want, but you don't have to guard my door at night, Hesho. I appreciate it, but I would be happier if you are happy."

"Ah," he said, tapping his mask. "But I have taken the mask, Spin. As I told you before, this is a promise. By wearing it, I indicate to everyone that I have banished Hesho. The emperor is no more."

"Then keep the mask," I said. "And go back to your wives."

"I could do that, yes. And they'd probably accept me. But it would ruin too many things." He reached into the pocket of his formal robes and took out a datapad. "The senate is working effectively for once—they threw off the Superiority while I was gone! They agreed to support this rebellion!

They are debating among themselves, and strangely seem more *unified* now that they are no longer *ruled*. Plus, my children are grown and have positions of authority, most serving underneath my wives—who are far more powerful now that I’m gone. Each of the three has taken a consort.”

“Already? You were presumed dead for barely a few weeks!”

“Our unions were political,” he said, his paw resting on the screen in a way I thought was fond, “designed to unite factions on our planet. Without me, they can return to their own families triumphant, having served the greater needs of our people. I miss them all, but each is now the most politically important member of her clan. My children gain much through the respect paid to them because of my sacrifice. My survival would have been...inconvenient for everyone, had I not taken the mask.

“It is the same story everywhere I search. My people were ready to move on. They were ready for the emperor to vanish, but so long as I persisted, they could not. It is better for everyone that I remain isolated. Sometimes I wish I had not recovered my memories at all.”

“I’m sorry, Hesho,” I said softly. “That scudding *sucks*.” Then I winced. “Maybe...pretend I said something wise instead.”

“I cherish wisdom,” he said. “Yet today, empathy helps more. Thank you. It *does* ‘scudding suck.’ Like the dark of the moon, which can never show its face to the light, and never know the kiss of the dawn.”

“Yeah, just like that,” I said. “Or when you bruise your knuckles punching Jorgen in the knee. Sucks all around, because he didn’t actually deserve it, and now your hand hurts.”

“Or how the fish and the hawk can never be friends, despite having entirely different perspectives to share with one another.”

“Or like when you *really* need to scream at someone, but the only person you can find is someone nice like Rig. So after yelling, you actually feel *worse*.”

“Or how every painting will eventually degrade, so that the universe is constantly losing its masterworks to inevitable decay.”

“Or like when you need to pee during maneuvers, but realize you forgot to hook up the flight suit catheter.”



Hesho chuckled. He seemed to think that one was a joke, but it really *did* suck. I assumed he didn't know, because his ships were big enough—rather, the occupants were small enough—to contain full lavatory facilities.

“Thank you,” he said. “Smiling does help.”

“We could go to the firing range and blow some stuff up,” I offered, “if you want some *real* therapy.”

“Yes. Perhaps later? You seemed concerned earlier. Can I help you in turn?”

I knocked my head backward against the frame of the door, where I was still sitting, one foot up on the opposite side. “Yeah. That.”

“I'm sorry. Would you rather not be reminded?”

“No, I came out looking for advice,” I said. “Brade wants to duel me.”

“Ah. You two are like a pair of celestial bodies, drawn to conflict by forces you cannot control. I am not, therefore, surprised.”

“I think it's a good idea,” I said to him. “I can beat her and remove her from Winzik's arsenal.”

“As I have yet to meet a pilot who can best you in a fair fight, I'm inclined to agree with that assessment. Assuming we can be certain it's not a trap.”

“Yeah. Any...idea how to do that?”

“Scout the area ahead of time,” he said. “Agree to both place an inhibitor slug before entering the region. Maybe even send in a decoy first.”

“Smart.”

“I'm simply adapting the actions taken by Jilo in the *Epic of Jilo*. But I appreciate your faith in me.”

“So we do those things,” I said. “Except...”

“Jorgen?” he guessed.

“Yeah. Jorgen. He's going to say no. He'll worry I'm risking myself needlessly, and a duel is totally against protocol—even though once a battle starts we're basically just dueling each other anyway, so protocols are stupid. Wish *I* were an emperor.”

“Life is in many ways simpler when one is an absolute authority, capable of deciding whatever one wants. But there are huge drawbacks as

well, Spin, to such a calling.”

“I suppose,” I said, closing my eyes. “Do you think...maybe...I’m like you? That everyone would be better off if I stayed away? If I flew off somewhere and never bothered them again? Then nobody would get hurt trying to keep up with me. I could just do what needed to be done—and Jorgen wouldn’t get into trouble, because I wouldn’t be under his command.”

Hesho didn’t reply.

“Hesho?” I asked, cracking an eye.

“I am thinking that I have burdened you with my own terrible thoughts,” he admitted. “That if I had not spoken of my isolation, you would not be thinking of adopting the same sensibility. That I should have remained isolated from you for your own good. That it would be for the best if I left...”

I rolled over and went down on my stomach, putting myself at eye level with Hesho. “No,” I said to him. “*Please* don’t be like that, Hesho. Not to me. I’m, like, an interdimensional monster or something. If one of us is bad for the other, it’s *me*.”

“Thus, we both persist in the same worry. Perhaps we are both wrong.”

“Agreed,” I said. “We stick together. You and me, at least. All right?” I held out my fist for a little fist bump.

He considered. “Fate declared that I should be your companion, and it was the path to my sanity,” he finally decided. “I accept your words.” He solemnly removed his mask, then reached up and tapped my fist with one of his claws.

“Good,” I said.

“So what do we do?” he asked, replacing his mask. “About Brade? Sneak off in the night like assassins?”

I wavered.

Scud, Jorgen would *kill* me.

And I’d deserve it. “No,” I said. “I’m going to go talk to Jorgen first and get permission.”

“Very well,” Hesho said. “I shall prepare tea for your return.”

“Prepare a bandage too,” I said, climbing to my feet. “I’m half-convinced he’s going to stab me for even *daring* to ask.”

## 20

I didn't just hyperjump into Jorgen's room, like I normally would have. I didn't even march up to his door and bang on it, like a proper warrior would.

I made an appointment.

With his *secretary*.

Rikolfr was the same aide Cobb had used, inherited from Ironsides. He seemed to find my newfound rule-following nature as baffling as I did.

"An appointment..." the man said as I stood by the video-comm on the wall of my room. He looked through Jorgen's schedule, which was written out in this big book instead of computerized. Rikolfr was old-school. "I can do tomorrow morning."

"No, it needs to be today," I said. "Is he still in the meeting?"

"He just got out. He has scheduled an hour to decompress and go over his notes."

"Great, schedule me instead of that," I said.

"But—"

"It's fine."

"Commodore Nightshade," he said, "I don't think you quite understand the purpose of appointments."

"I called ahead," I snapped. "The rule book says to call ahead. Book the appointment, Rikolfr, or I'll push you out an airlock."

He paled.

"I'd put you in a space suit first," I said, rolling my eyes. "What do you think I am, a monster?"

“Uh...okay,” he said. “I’m sending him a note that you’ll be visiting him in five minutes—and that you wouldn’t accept my insistence that he not be interrupted—”

“Please note that I’m following protocol,” I said. “Write it down.” I growled at him until he did. Stupid man needed to see how difficult this was. I needed him to work with me.

Five minutes later, I appeared in front of Jorgen’s door and pounded on it with a warrior’s fervor. He opened it, tall and intimidating in his admiral’s uniform. And handsome. Why was he so scudding handsome?

He took me in for a moment, then sighed and stepped back, gesturing for me to enter. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Rikolfr was a pill,” I said, stalking in. “He acted like it was some great imposition for me to ask him to do his job.”

“His job,” Jorgen said, “is to make certain I’m not interrupted when I have work to do. There are exceptions for my command staff, however, if there is some emergency...”

I stopped at his table—which was scattered with notes and star charts. Strange, how much paper we had now that we could get it from the other planets. I turned back toward him and took a deep breath. “Rule 48b, subrule 18,” I said. “Officer turns herself in for discipline and demands demotion. I declare that I’m demoted back to lieutenant.”

Jorgen turned toward me, the door to his study sliding closed. He seemed...amused?

“I read the scudding rules,” I said, hands on hips. “And so I’m a lieutenant now. By the book, Jorgen!”

“You read the rules,” he said.

“Yup.”

“On military discipline.”

“Whole thing.”

“And now...”

“Now I’m going to declare myself demoted!” I said.

His smile widened. “Spensa, you can’t declare that.”

“Rule 48b, subrule 18—”

“In the *Handbook of Intersectional Discipline*,” he said. “Yes. It says that an officer, upon failure or disgrace, can request demotion. As a form of saving face, Spensa. It lets an officer admit they’ve made a tactical error with grave consequences—and is actually there to prevent them from committing suicide, as would occasionally happen in some militaries. At any rate, they can *request* demotion.”

“Which is what I’m doing.”

He gave me a flat stare.

“In my own way,” I admitted. Then I softened my tone. “Look, I’m *trying*.”

“I know you are,” he said, walking over to me. “I appreciate it. But you could just apologize.”

“That’s the thing,” I said, then bit my lip.

“You don’t think you did anything wrong, do you?”

“It’s...complicated,” I said. “I broke the rules, sure. But...Jorgen, I would do it again. So maybe it’s best if you just bust me back to LT as a consequence.”

He sighed, settling down in one of the seats around the table. I, after a moment’s hesitation, did likewise.

“Spensa,” he said, “what would that accomplish? No one follows you because of your *rank*, and I doubt you care about it. I could name you an airman in charge of floor mopping, and it wouldn’t make a difference.”

He...had a point. Plus, in the stories, it was practically a rite of passage for the heroine to repeatedly get kicked out of the military. Never really bothered them. It had only happened to me once that I could recall, so I wasn’t even keeping up.

I put my elbows on the table, looking him in the eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said softly, “for hurting you. I’m sorry for ignoring your authority. If I were to do it again, I’d talk to you. But...I know I’d go again, if you said no. I’m a terrible soldier, aren’t I?”

“Your passion is what makes you a great soldier, Spensa,” he said. “But is it really *that* difficult to trust me? To try it *my* way? Just to see?”

“I read the rules!”

He reached his hand across the table, palm up. I hesitantly put mine on top of it.

"That's a step forward," he said. "I appreciate the gesture."

"I will...listen better. And try things your way." I sighed. "This was a whole lot more fun when you were my rules-obsessed boyfriend and I could corrupt you. Why'd you have to go and become the guy in charge of everything?"

"I didn't choose that so much as have it forced upon me..."

"Sure," I said. "*You* can just up and decide to be admiral, but if *I* try to change *my* rank..." I smiled at him, and got a smile back. "So..." I continued, "can I please go duel Brade to the death in a contest of honor?"

He gave me a long, slow blink. "Who?"

"Brade," I said, realizing that Jorgen hadn't been there for most of my experiences with her. "Winzik's pet human cytonic. I flew with her at Starsight...you saw her once, I think. You saved me when she was trying to capture my soul?"

"Right," he said. "Short, dark hair? Sneer on her lips?"

"Yup," I said. "She's been popping up in my head lately, connecting to me cytonically. She invited me to come try to kill her. Can I go do it, please please please?"

"One of the Superiority's cytonics has invited you to a duel?" he said. "Spensa, that's *obviously* a trap."

"Hesho and I figured that," I said. "We'll scout it out first."

He squeezed my hand. I thought I could follow his thoughts as various pieces of him warred, each one trying to be victorious and get to explain how *terrible* this idea was.

"Spensa..."

"I know," I said with a sigh, leaning back. "I'm way more valuable to our fight than she is to hers. Even if I'm likely to win, the risk isn't worth the gain. I don't have the resources to determine if it's actually a trap or not, and it's foolish to try. I want to anyway."

"How do I talk you out of it?" he asked, his voice pained.

"Order me not to, maybe?"

“When has that worked?”

“Today it might,” I said. “I’m *trying* to be better.”

He squeezed my hand again, then frowned. “Wait. An enemy cytonic has been able to contact you?”

“Yes. Why?”

“We’re inside Detritus’s defenses,” he said. “There’s an inhibition field around the entire planet, fully strengthened now that we know what we’re doing. Without that shield, the enemy wouldn’t have had to spend years fighting through it with bombs to destroy us—they’d have been able to hyperjump the bombs right into our caverns.”

“Yeah, it’s strange,” I said. “Brade says we’re connected somehow. Maybe that’s the reason? I’ve always been able to hyperjump while inside Detritus’s protection. Even before I could understand any kind of passcode or key to allow me.”

“Yes,” he said. “And while Alanik couldn’t hyperjump in originally—that’s why she got shot down trying to fly past the platforms—she managed it later. We are pretty sure that anyone born here automatically has the key, though before we really understood all of this, the defenses were weakening. The enemy was able to pilot their drones via cytonic communication, and influence your father’s mind. Rig says that he’s got the field bolstered, now that we can persuade slugs to power the equipment. But we’re still not a hundred percent sure how it works.”

Huh. Regardless, it seemed I was a weak link. A hole in our defenses.

Jorgen stood up. “Every day, we discover another oddity about this planet. If an enemy cytonic can contact you despite the inhibition field...it’s possible they can figure out how to get ships in here, which would be a disaster. We—”

The door chimed and he paused, then walked over and opened it to reveal Rikolfr, who handed him an envelope.

*Oh, sure, I thought. He has no problem interrupting Jorgen’s private time himself.*

Jorgen walked back and absently sliced the side of the envelope off with a mindblade—an invisible something he could do with his powers. I’d



missed him experimenting with this, and so far I could barely even *grasp* what he was doing—let alone replicate it. My talents didn't lie in that direction.

He pulled out a card, then smiled.

"What?" I asked.

"It's the kitsen formal agreement to our offer of alliance," he said, "and joint war." He turned the card over, showing the flowery writing and ink designs. "They told me they'd send it. Apparently on their planet, people like to get them framed."

Scud. I loved those fuzzy little maniacs. I'd be proud to fight beside them. Only...

"It's bad, isn't it?" I said, reading Jorgen's expression.

He nodded, gesturing to the star charts and troop counts scattered on the table. "Winzik is gathering his forces at a place named Evensong. An old platform, repurposed as their communications hub."

I'd read about this in the data dump. "That's where they keep their slugs, Jorgen!" I said, rising from the table. "The majority of their taynix, when not being used as hyperdrives, are there. Including *all* of their communications slugs."

"The most fortified position in the Superiority," he agreed.

"Yeah," I said. Then paused. "We should attack it."

"*What?*"

"They're going to throw everything they have at us, right?" I said. "We can't let *them* choose the battleground, Jorgen. The others worried about this earlier—we have two planets to defend, Evershore and ReDawn. Yet there is only one Detritus. Wherever we set up, they'll hit the other planet, attack the people there as punishment for our rebellion.

"We don't have the forces to defend both. So we need to go on the offensive. He's gathering his troops, right? And it will take days for him to organize." I shrugged. "So we should hit him first. It's the only thing that gives us a chance."

"It's also crazy," he said.

“Crazy *good* though,” I said. “Bold and decisive. We have known their big weakness all along—we keep talking about it.”

“That they need to keep their tech centralized to a few locations,” he said. “To prevent their secrets from spreading.”

“A huge chunk of their slugs are at that communications hub,” I said. “If we liberated them...what would happen to the Superiority? We should do it! Now! Tonight!”

“Spensa,” he said, “jumping straight into action is *why* we’re in this position in the *first place*. We have to take time to plan.”

“But every hour we wait is another hour they have to gather more forces!” I stepped up to him. “Jorgen, we can break through and rescue those slugs. You can see how panicked the enemy is at not having acclivity stone—imagine if they couldn’t *communicate*. Scud, what if they couldn’t hyperjump! Or inhibit us! What if we took every slug away from them?”

“They won’t have every slug in the Superiority on that station,” he said. “Only the majority of the commslugs, per our intel, and a large number of the others not currently in service.”

“Yes, but they’re hard on their slugs,” I said. “They wear them out. If we steal their reserves, it would be a *huge* blow to their battle capacity. They’d have to pull slugs off the shipping routes! They’d lose a *ton* of mobility.

“Plus, Evensong...it’s their central communications hub. You’ve heard Cuna talk. If we take it, rescue those slugs, the enemy won’t be able to relay information. They’ll have to go into war practically blindfolded. It’s an opportunity any general in history would have *salivated* over! We have to hit the enemy now, before they get smart and realize their policy of keeping taynix secret—and confined to a few key locations—exposes them to attack!”

He met my eyes. Then he shook his head. “It’s too hasty to commit to right now.”

“But—”

“I’ll raise it with the others,” he promised. “I think this is a good idea, and likely the best course—but I’m not going to authorize an attack tonight.

That *isn't* how we work. We work as a team, as allies to our friends. That is protocol."

"To hell with protocol!" I said. "What have those rules ever gotten us? They're a stupid bunch of things written by people who don't understand battle, and are too cowardly to go fight in one!"

I immediately knew I'd gone too far.

Jorgen winced as if I'd punched him. In a moment of pain, I realized he probably wished I had. He saw the rules like I saw the stories Gran-Gran told. As a way to make sense of the world, and life, and...

And scud, I was an idiot.

"Jorgen," I said. "I—"

"We can't all just make it up as we go, Spensa," he said, his voice cold. "We can't all just barrel forward, expecting someone else to pick up the pieces. Some of us need structure. Advice. Rules."

"I know. I didn't mean—"

"I *will* take your proposal to the others," he said, his voice growing louder. Not shouting me down, more...*sterning* me down. "I believe it has merit, and I will explain to them why. You need to wait."

I gritted my teeth. I needed to trust him on this, didn't I? But what if waiting was wrong?

Should I go duel Brade? That was a decision for me, not for him, right? It would mean doing *something* while waiting on Jorgen and the—

"Are you thinking," he said to me, "that because I'm delaying on this plan you *literally* just dreamed up, you should go back to dueling that woman?"

"...Maybe," I admitted, resentful of how well he understood me.

"You realize that a duel with her wouldn't be about piloting skill," he said. "She'll betray you."

"Yes," I admitted. I'd just outlined the reasons why dueling her would be stupid.

But it was hard to not be moving. Acting.

Maybe that was my problem.

“Spensa,” he said, “I can’t stop you from running off to do whatever you want. I doubt our entire military could hold you. But if you have even an ounce of respect for me—if you *legitimately* care for me—you will listen. This is it, Spensa. I’m asking you, and commanding you, not to duel this woman. I’m asking you to *listen* to me for once. Will you do that?”

I trembled, but scud him, he was right. And I did trust him and care for him. “Okay,” I said softly. “I won’t run off, Jorgen. No duel with Brade.”

“And you won’t secretly try to attack the Superiority’s central communications base?” he said. “No going around me to gather troops for an attack?”

“No rush at Evensong,” I promised. “But when you talk to the others, make it clear how many slugs are there. We need to rescue them. It’s our moral duty.”

“I will do so. Thank you.” He seemed far more relaxed, now that I’d promised not to do either of these things.

I left then, ostensibly to respect his planning time. But really because I wasn’t sure I could keep my emotions properly in check. Best to be out of sight in case they exploded.

For better or for worse, though, it was time to listen to Jorgen. Hopefully that wouldn’t cost us the world itself.

## 21

The next day was one of the roughest in my life. I kept thinking about the enemy gathering their troops—building an overwhelming strike force that would eventually annihilate our allies, isolate us, then destroy Detritus. Yes, the planet was an amazing technological marvel. But Jorgen was right: if we fled, they'd find us. And every rock could be broken with time, every shield worn down.

We had to *strike*. But I...I had to let the others make that decision. So I waited. Which was awful.

Until finally something arrived: a note leading me to the cargo bay. There I found a huge delivery for me—almost three meters tall and ten meters on each side—and wrapped in obscuring plastic. Rig had come through, and his fabricators had built what I'd requested. The note apologized for not being able to complete the assembly. Apparently he had an even more important project for the fabricators. Making more platforms to replace the weaker portions of our defenses, I suspected.

At any rate, this was what I'd wanted. I was glad to have to do a little assembly, in fact. I quickly fetched Doomslug and Hesho, returning with the two of them—her in her holster, him hovering along beside me on his platform.

"And this is...?" he asked.

"A project," I said. "So I keep busy and stop worrying about everything going wrong."

"Excellent," he said. "What variety of project are we talking about? Are we constructing, perhaps, a dojo for meditation?"

I smiled, then touched the huge plastic-wrapped package and held out my hand for him. He landed his ship on my palm, the plate-size disc heavy in my hand. I didn't need to hold it for long, however, as I hyperjumped us and the package away. Down from the platforms and space stations and into the caverns of Detritus.

To one in particular. One where I'd lived for months while in flight school. Rubble to one side, some scraps of metal in the center, a table and some old dishware I'd scavenged in the corner.

Doomslug let out a happy fluting. This was the cavern where I'd found M-Bot.

It was time to build him a new body.

I could have done it up above, of course. It would have been *smart* to build it there, with all the available resources and tools. But I was feeling nostalgic, and wanted to be more secluded—somewhere that wasn't always reminding me of our impending doom.

So I began unwrapping. Rig's fabricators had put together the bulk of the fuselage; the basic ship was there, contained in a metal framework. It was missing key parts though, like the canopy, some of the wiring, and many of the outer plates. Those were packed for me to install.

I unfolded a large set of schematics—ones copied from plans in the data dump. The very ones the enemy had made when they'd disassembled M-Bot. Fortunately, they'd been meticulous.

Rig had included some detailed instructions written out by one of his assistants—incredibly, he had seven of those now—and she'd even included some visualizations. I smiled, wishing I could co-opt Rig himself to help me, but he had more important things to do. I probably did too.

I stayed here anyway, and got to work.

The first step was to lay out the parts. Hesho helped with his hover platform, which had a small light-line on it for moving objects. He'd grown accustomed to needing such devices in the world of giants; even turning a doorknob would be a challenge for a creature of his size.

Some of these plates, though, were heavy beyond his capacity. Fortunately Rig had thought of that, and sent me a small acclivity ring

mover for shuffling parts around—in particular the boosters and front nose piece, which still needed to be attached. We organized the parts, then I spread the large schematics out on the table. Followed by the datapad with the actual “Spensa, just do this” instructions.

I wasn’t incompetent at this sort of thing. I knew more than most, as I’d proved during my time with the Broadsiders. But assembling a complicated starship would have been beyond me, if Rig’s fabricators hadn’t done around eighty percent of the work already. As it was, the remainder looked like it would walk the perfect line: challenging, but doable by one pilot, her pet teleportation slug, and her fox-gerbil bodyguard.

It was too bad we were basically doomed, because—looked at without context—my life was kind of awesome.

“So,” Hesho said—he’d left his mask on the table, as it was just us—“I sense a reverence to your actions. This place is special to you.”

“It’s where I first found M-Bot,” I said. “Broken down. I spent months repairing him in here, alone.”

“Alone?” Doomslug fluted from where she sat on the wing of the ship nearby.

“Alone save for my trusty slug companion,” I corrected. “And Rig, who maybe helped a little.”

Hesho looped over, using his ship to project some holographic instructions for me as I started work on the landing gear, which needed to be put in place before we removed the scaffolding from the ship.

I nodded my thanks as I worked. “The original build was, I’ll admit, a lot more...scrappy an experience.”

“I’m unfamiliar with the term,” he said.

“Today we’ve got advanced tools,” I explained, shoving part of the landing gear in place. “And this thing practically sticks together on its own. Back then? I only had what I could scavenge or what I could convince Rig to steal for me.”

“Your life has been one long...scrappy experience, hasn’t it?” he said.

“Yeah. Haunting tunnels as a kid with my family. Settling in Igneous, then hunting rats because we were outcasts. Now...well, whatever I am

now.”

“Your life has taught you the opposite lessons to what mine has,” he said. “For you, everything is hard. If an opportunity presents itself, you must snatch it or lose it to someone fiercer. You don’t have time to think, because if you think, you starve. Is this an accurate summation?”

“Yeah,” I said, wiping my brow as I worked. “I suppose it is.”

“This makes it difficult for you when dealing with those who have lived in privilege,” he said. “We spend our lives learning to plan. Often, those in power stay in power because of such luxuries—it is not that they are smarter or more capable, but that they’ve had the opportunity to think about tomorrow, not just today.”

“Damn, that’s a good explanation,” I said, dragging over another chunk of landing gear. “Have you been listening in on my mind or something? You aren’t secretly cytonic, are you?”

“I merely have a special chance, these days, to consider myself and my life.”

“I told Jorgen,” I said, getting down low to begin bolting a wheel into place, “that I thought we should attack the Superiority. Right now, before they can gather their strength. He wants more time, but he’s wrong. I can feel it. We need to hit Winzik before he’s at his best! It’s basic tactics. We should go straight to the communications hub and force the enemy to engage us there. Winzik will have to protect it.”

“Won’t that mean attacking him where he has a battlefield advantage?” Hesho said. “He’ll have inhibition fields in place at the communications hub. Can we find a way to force him to engage us where *our* inhibitors are in play?”

“I doubt it,” I said. “We don’t have enough inhibitors. We can’t cover both ReDawn and Evershore with them—so if we wait, Winzik can hit whichever population is exposed, breaking us. He’s willing to strike civilians; his attack on your planet proves that. This means that we’re much better on offense than we are on defense.”

“What if we were to *move* our populations?” Hesho said. “Your grandmother mentioned perhaps bringing us with you, and I have been



considering her words of wisdom. My people take up far less room than humans do, while the people of ReDawn inhabit only a small part of their planet—their total planetary population is under three million. What if we moved one or both populations onto Detritus for the battle?”

“I...don’t think we could do that in time,” I said. “Evacuating even three million people seems a remarkable task.”

“Yes, but using hyperslugs?” he said. “No need for transports? We just assemble groups, teleport them to the proper location, then repeat.”

“I still think it would be too hard,” I said. “But...”

“But it’s a possibility,” Hesho said. “Planning, Spensa. Jorgen’s life has taught him to plan. It has taught him the value of structure. I do not know him as well as you, but I wonder if the rules he holds dear are revered because for him, they’ve actually worked. When for you...they have not.”

I tightened a bolt, then started on the next part of the landing gear after he brought it over with his light-line.

“Hesho,” I said, “you are super smart. You realize that, right?”

“I spent my life being told that,” he said, “by people who were obligated to do so. I enjoy hearing it from those who are not.”

“You solve so many things for me,” I continued, twisting a bolt with vigor. There was a power driver for this, but I wanted to work up a sweat. I would finish them all up with the machine to make them secure. “I wish I could give you something you need in return, but you were basically the richest guy on a planet for most of your life, so I don’t know what I could offer.”

He hovered down beside me as I worked. “Spensa,” he said, “do you know the one thing an emperor always has trouble finding?”

“A good rat sandwich?”

“Friends,” he said, and smiled. “On my planet, I could have no equals, because no one dared treat me as one—and I never dared expect them to. When I vanished, they mourned me but did not grieve. Then you found me, and you refused to let me stay lost. Rest assured, you offer me a great deal. Something I have not known since I was a kit.”

He reached out his paw, then pulled the fingers in, making a fist—as I’d done earlier. I gave him a bump, and he nodded to me. “Come. Let us make a body for our other lost friend. So that he may rejoin our menagerie of misfits.”

I didn’t know if M-Bot would be able to inhabit a body again. But scud, I hoped he could. I wanted so badly to make him a home, a place where he knew he belonged. Partially because of things he’d said earlier, partially to keep myself busy, and partially because...well, it felt right. And as Hesho had said, I’d learned to go with what felt right.

That said, he made good points about not rushing in to attack. I wished Jorgen had made those points to me—but maybe he shouldn’t have had to. Maybe the points he had made, that I should *trust* him, were the more important ones.

How much trust had he shown in me? A great deal. Trust in me to go to Starsight, to do what I needed to in the nowhere. Trust with his whole heart. A trust I wanted to deserve.

I threw myself into working on the ship, attaching the boosters and checking the wiring. I was particularly careful when I installed the wide black box that M-Bot’s old ship had contained—the assembly of hard drive and processors that had made up his brain. A motherboard and chipset that used acclivity stone instead of something like silicon and atomilin. Capable of letting the computer process *inside the nowhere*.

It was what let this ship break normal computing limits. I didn’t know a lot about the engineering of it, but I hoped that this would give M-Bot a body again when in our realm.

*The delvers can exist here, I thought. They make a body when they come, a crude—and terrible—replica of the housing that carried them as AIs.* So I felt this should work. I hoped it would, at least.

Hesho helped with the wiring, proving particularly useful with some of the fine details of the job. He hummed as he did, then softly broke into song, Doomslug fluting along. After a few minutes of that, he used his dashboard to play some samples for her from an instrument his people made—a kind of bamboo flute. She imitated that, and soon they were

singing in harmony. Him a deep bass, resonant and soft—a mournful song. Her an airy flute, with sharp cuts between notes.

It was beautiful, so I turned off the translation function on my pin, which was spoiling it. I just listened, working, appreciating how this specific song echoed in the boundaries of the cavern. Enjoying the moment—rather than being overwhelmed by both past and future.

Inside my soul, Chet hummed along in his own way. Seeming perfectly content. But that was wrong.

*Wrong?* he thought. *Wrong how?*

*Because this isn't what life is about,* I replied.

*What do you mean?*

What *did* I mean? I found myself in an odd mood as I read through how to attach the canopy. I'd come down here to try to recapture the feeling I'd had as a lonely girl building herself a starfighter. But...I wasn't that girl anymore. Instead of finding solace in the solitude, I wanted to share the experience.

FM would have loved to hear Hesho sing, and Kimmalyln would have had something to say—I'm sure—about the irony of building a hyperadvanced spaceship in a cave. Like I was some kind of overachieving Neanderthal. Nedd was recovering, and I wanted to hear his affable voice again. He complained, but enjoyed hands-on work, and Arturo would probably have spotted me getting the wiring wrong on this section of the throttle controls—and prevented me from having to redo it.

I wasn't alone any longer. Why did I keep pretending that I was? I smiled as I stood up, wiping my brow—which was sweaty, but not a bit stained with grease. At least my jumpsuit was dusty from the ground. This was supposed to be messy work, but Rig had packaged everything too neatly.

“So,” Hesho said, hovering over the schematics on the table, “I believe that the booster controls and the central processing are all fully installed. The next task is to check wing control function before we put the plates on. She mentions we might want to look over the air intake channels first, as

there is some tricky bolting to be done there.” He looked up at me. “Are you fatigued? Should we take a break?”

“Nah,” I said. “I’m good. What about you?”

“Eager and ready,” he said. “I’ve never actually *built* anything before. It’s an engaging process. Blissfully laborious. Like the flow of water in a wash, depositing stones in just the right place upon the bed, making a roadway of colors once the rainy season is through.”

“Exactly as I would have said it,” I told him, grabbing the power driver to tighten some bolts. “Except I’d have used more blood.”

Hesho smiled and began laying out the next set of parts while I worked. I didn’t get far, however, before someone nosed in on my brain.

*Hey, M-Bot said. I managed to sneak away. Except not “away” because nothing is “away” from anything else in here. It’s complicated.*

*Well...good, I guess, I sent back to him. Any leads on how to use whatever I am to stop the delvers?*

*No real leads, he said. Just confirmations. I can meld in among them, pretend to be one of them. They’re not a group mind, as we’ve discussed, just a bunch of individuals with the exact same...personality? Basic core self?*

*Regardless, it’s easy to imitate one of them, as I simply have to react as they all would. I’ve acquired a copy of their programming, such that it is. Again, this is complicated, but they’re not used to having a spy among them. So they have no idea how to look for me.*

*All right...I sent, trying to follow that, and to imagine him in a place that wasn’t a place among a bunch of delvers who just thought he was another one of them.*

*Anyway, he continued, as we figured out, they fear you because you know the source of their pain. They’re afraid that interacting with you will bring it back to the surface—because, Spensa, they have not done a good job of burying it. It’s there, within their substance, within their code. The loss, the agony. I feel it.*

*Right, I thought. And while they’re in the nowhere, if that pain were to surface, it would never fade—because time doesn’t pass.*

*There's another reason, he sent back. We're not AIs or robots any longer, no more than you are an amoeba, but we started there—and we don't forget except on purpose. Emotional pain doesn't dull for us over time, because we don't have the process of natural mortal forgetfulness.*

Huh. That seemed a relevant thing to understand. It wasn't that the delvers were too weak to “weather the pain” like I'd done with my father's death. They'd literally *needed* to excise parts of themselves to make it fade. Like a wolf gnawing its foot off to escape a trap.

Realizing this made me ache for them even more. That was bad though. They literally threatened all life in the galaxy; they'd already wiped out millions of people, and would go further if they had to. This was one case where, empathy notwithstanding, I needed to be a warrior. They had a wound. I would exploit it, just like you would try to hit an opponent where they'd already been stabbed.

*We still need to know how to use this, I said to M-Bot. They're afraid of me, because somehow I make them remember. But how? How can I do it consciously?*

*Not sure, he replied. I'll keep studying and looking. We need to be fast though. As I said, it seems the deal between them and Winzik is still in force. He's promised them that all cytonics—and you especially—will be silenced, and the Superiority will move to using slugs only. The delvers want that very badly, so they're determined to join the confrontation and stop us.*

I nodded. M-Bot's confirmations were helpful, but we were still in the same position. When the delvers came to attack, I had to be ready to either immobilize them or inhibit them. Locking them up in their own cells of eternal agony...

*If we manage this, I thought to M-Bot, do you really think they'd just lock up rather than run?*

*Yes, he said. It's how we respond to things we can't deal with. An infinite loop, locking up, frozen in time as we process the same terrible experience over and over—and see no escape. Do that at the right moment, and...*

And at the very least it might surprise—even intimidate—Winzik and his team. Assuming we could find the key to exposing their pain, it was a

potential solution to a problem that nobody but me seemed willing to acknowledge. The fact that the true victors in the galaxy would be the ones who could control the delvers.

*Hey, I sent him, remembering what Jorgen and I had discussed. While I'm thinking of it. Do you notice any difficulty in talking to me in here, when I'm near Detritus? From the inhibitor slugs?*

*Eh, he said. It's noticeable, but more like a little buzz. I'm a grown-up delver now, Spensa. Very scary. We're too powerful to care about inhibitors.*

*I know, I sent back. The delver that scoured Detritus all those years ago didn't respond to their inhibitors either. That's kind of what's worrying me.*

*Why?*

I just shook my head as I worked, sending him a general sense of discontent. I was beginning to think that Brade was wrong. She and I weren't connected mystically, or any nonsense like that. I had a delver on my soul, so things like inhibitors were weaker around me. I'd been able to break through them at least once. Maybe that was why she could contact me. Because I was weakening the inhibition field.

*I don't sense her right now, if that helps, he said. Just you, Doomslug, and Hesho, in...hey, is that my cavern? Why are you...*

I looked up from my work beside the wing of the ship, but there was nothing to look at. Just the empty cavern.

*Is that for me?* M-Bot said, his cytonic "voice" laden with emotion. In this case, it came as an overwhelming wave of joy and disbelief, tied up in one. *Spensa, you're rebuilding my body?*

I grinned. *I'd hoped to keep it a surprise, I said to him. That doesn't work so well when your friend can literally see through your eyes.*

*Spensa, he said, his voice trembling. That...Thank you. How? How can you rebuild it?*

*The data dump we stole? I sent to him. It had the schematics the Superiority drew as they tore your old body apart. We can make it new, maybe even better—without restrictions, like the one preventing you from flying yourself.*

*Spensa, I...I've never been given a gift before. It's wonderful.*

*It's not done yet, I sent him. It will take days, maybe weeks, for us to finish this.*

*Yes, but you thought of it. You're doing it. For me. I...I'm leaking emotion. Oh! It's why you cry, even when you're happy. I understand now!*

I grinned, the “leaking” joy he felt washing over me. And inside, Chet trembled.

*This, he thought to me. Don't destroy the others. Show them this. Somehow. The joy that consumes the pain.*

As Hesho hovered over, I winked. “M-Bot saw,” I told him. “He’s grateful for what we’re doing.”

“Please convey to him my respect and well wishes,” Hesho said. “His sacrifice, though not permanent, was my salvation—and I owe him a debt of gratitude.”

“I think M-Bot would rather have a debt of friendship.”

Hesho cocked his head, then smiled at that. “I think I would too. What a precious realization...and what a precious life I now can live...”

That gave me an idea. This entire project of mine down here...well, it had been built on a false premise. I was glad—absolutely—that I’d decided to fix M-Bot’s ship. But I didn’t need this cavern any longer.

Hesho deserved better anyway.

“Come on,” I said to him, holding out my hand for Hesho. “Let’s take a break. It’s dinnertime anyway.”

“Excellent,” he said, hovering over. “A solitary meal in your room, contemplating our upcoming battle?”

“Nope,” I said. “Not this time.”

## 22

Hesho and I appeared in the cafeteria, but I'd judged things wrong. Dinner was already over, and a group of rookie ground troops were busy wiping down the tables. A few looked at me and jumped. The old me would have appreciated the fearsome reputation I'd cultivated. Today, the panic of having missed the others was far more potent.

Hesho hovered up beside my head, then turned a masked face toward me, seeming confused. "We're not too late," he said. "Look, they have some of the latecomer meals." He pointed to the sandwiches prepared for those with irregular shifts.

I grabbed two, because I was starving and wanted enough to share with Hesho, but this wasn't actually why we'd come. I had to find the others.

A part of me realized that my sudden urgency was silly. There would be more times to chat with my friends. But I'd noticed a welling-up need, a solution to my own anxiety, that had to be filled. I wanted to see them. Chet wanted to see them. Both of us needed this. Right now. And I'd missed the chance to be part of what was normally one of the most...

Wait. It was Thursday.

I waved to Hesho, then turned down the hallway. Not hyperjumping, but moving at a brisk almost-run toward the hangar bays. I pushed open the door, then let out a relieved sigh. They were here.

Thursday was our flight's time in the hangar for maintenance. Which was something of a misnomer, since the ground crews did most of the difficult work. They replaced parts and ran detailed diagnostics. That left



the pilots to do our preflight checklist each time we went into the air, and what we did on Thursdays.

Wash the ships.

It was more ritual than requirement. We rarely flew in atmosphere anymore, and the ships didn't get as dirty as they once had. But there was a bond between a pilot and her ship, and it helped to actively care for it. So once a week, we came in here to give the ships a bath and a polish.

As was tradition, everyone had gathered around one of the ships to work on it together. At the moment—wearing somewhat soggy dark green maintenance jumpsuits—they were working on Arturo's Poco, wiping char off the sides near the boosters, scrubbing the white panels until they shone, giving the canopy a good polish.

As soon as I burst in, Kimmalynd turned, then grinned widely and waved to me. I hesitantly made my way forward. I knew I shouldn't feel awkward rejoining them. I'd helped forge this team. But things had been off ever since I'd come back, with my soul trying to rip out of my body and my powers being strange and—

*Thwack.*

A wet towel hit me in the face as Nedd trotted by. It peeled off and fell into my hands. Wait. Nedd was here? Out of the infirmary? He looked pretty good, all things considered, with one sleeve sewn up just above the elbow.

He glanced at that, following my sight line, then winked. "Best excuse I've ever had to take a nap while Arturo works," he said. "Too bad the medics say they'll get me a prosthetic arm with fingers that can move. I've got to milk this for every ounce of sympathy I can before I become *cyborg Nedd*."

A prosthetic arm? We'd assumed his flying career was finished, as our technology wasn't particularly advanced in the realm of cybernetics, but maybe it was better than I thought.

Perhaps my failure wasn't as costly as I'd feared.

It was still my fault that he'd been hurt. "I..." I tried to force out the words.

“Come on!” he said, cutting me off. “We saved the messiest part for you.” He grinned then thumbed toward the ship’s landing skids.

“Nedd,” Arturo called, “she hasn’t come to a single one of these since she got back. We didn’t ‘save’ anything for her.”

“Sure we did!” Nedd called back. “We saved them for me, and by tradition, I waited for a way to make someone else do them.” He put his good arm out and grinned, while giving me a side hug.

And...well, everything wasn’t all right. Things were still strange. But I no longer felt like leaving.

“You should know better than to give me a dangerous weapon, Nedd,” I said to him, twisting the towel.

“Scud, no,” he said, dodging out of the way as I tried to whip it at him. “You’re the best one to hold the dangerous weapon! Then people aim at you instead of me, and we’re all happy.”

He ambled back toward the ship, and I started after him, then glanced at Hesho—who sat straight upright in his seat in the little hoverdisc. He had his white-and-red mask on, so I couldn’t see his expression, but from his prim posture and tightly gripped fists he seemed alarmed. He’d seen how we treated each other before, but I guessed maybe he found this even more extreme.

“This is normal,” I said to him, wolfing down a sandwich.

“It...is?”

“Yup. Trust me. This is good.”

He hovered beside me as I finished the sandwich and knelt to begin cleaning the landing gear. And despite what Nedd had said earlier, he got down with me and joined in, working with his good arm. Sadie, grinning, flipped down underneath the front of the ship, then hung just above us from a belt that she’d wrapped around the nose, and began polishing.

“Sadie?” I asked. “Did you strap yourself in so you could clean *upside down*?”

“So much easier this way,” she said. “Don’t have to crane your neck!”

“I’d fall asleep,” Nedd said from beside me. “Too much like a hammock.”

“Oh?” Kimmalyn replied, ducking down to look at us. “Are you implying that you need to be *comfortable* to take a nap, Nedd? I’ve caught you sleeping in the most ridiculous positions.”

“See, that’s the thing,” he said. “Once you fall asleep, you don’t *notice* anymore. ’Cuz you’re unconscious! So, sleeping when you’re uncomfortable is really the best way to approach life.”

“And sleeping when you’re comfortable?” I asked.

“Also the best way to approach life,” he said.

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn said.

“Nah, but you can bless my snores,” he said, grinning as he dug harder into the caked-on gunk on the landing gear.

Hesho hovered a little closer and picked his own section—some gears that were too tight for us to reach into—and cleaned there with a very small rag.

“You all know my friend Mask,” I said.

“Yup,” Nedd said.

“I must admit,” Hesho said to them, “I am not...accustomed to interactions of this sort. Please don’t mistake my stiffness for dislike.”

“That’s right,” Nedd said, wagging his rag at Hesho. “Mask, *I* heard you were someone real important before.”

“I...I was,” Hesho said. “But I don’t know if we should discuss...”

I gave Nedd a glance, but he winked at me. “I heard,” he continued, “you were a babysitter.”

“Yeah,” Sadie said, “like, you had to wrangle preschoolers. An entire country’s worth of them.”

“Seems like it would be a relief not to have to deal with that sort of thing anymore,” Nedd said, still working. “I feel for you, my friend. When did you *ever* get to take a nap?”

Hesho paused, then seemed amused as he responded. “Well, I shall say, I did *not* get to take many. It was quite the project, wrangling all those... preschoolers. I often didn’t even have time for meditation or composing poetry!”

Nedd gasped. “No poetry?”

“You compose poetry, Nedder?” Hesho asked.

“I love the stuff,” Nedd said.

“You do *not* compose poetry,” Arturo said, walking past.

“Forgive him,” Nedd said. “‘His wit’s as thick as a Tewkesbury mustard.’”

“As *what*?” I asked.

“It’s Shakespeare,” Nedd said.

Nearby, Arturo froze. He pulled out his datapad and looked through it, then looked back at Nedd, his jaw dropping. “It *is* Shakespeare. From *Henry the Fourth*.”

“‘A most notable coward,’” Nedd said, thumbing toward Arturo. “‘An infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise breaker, the owner of no one good quality.’ Man, that dude had the best insults. I love them.”

“Who is this again?” I asked.

“Ancient English dude,” Nedd said. “Wrote poetry. A lot of it survived the destruction of the *Defiant* and our records. You’d like him, Spin. Surprised your grandma didn’t tell you stories about him. You know, *Hamlet* and crud like that?”

“*Hamlet*...?” I said.

“It is the single most famous work of human literature,” Hesho replied. “Even I have studied it. And I find, Nedder, your taste in insults to be exceptional. You are obviously a man of great refinement.”

“See, Arturo,” Nedd said. “The preschool teacher agrees with me.” He gave Hesho a wide grin.

Nearby, Arturo was still staring, slack-jawed. As if he’d found out that his mother had secretly been a ninja all his life. “You,” he said, “have *memorized* quotes from *Shakespeare*.”

“Forgive Amphi,” Nedd said, leaning closer to Hesho. “He’s a little on the slow side sometimes. We try to be accommodating.”

“Oh, scud,” Arturo said, stalking off to join Alanik, who was preparing more buckets and soap for the next ship in line.

Hesho seemed to understand it was teasing, though. He was nodding behind his formal mask, and looked relaxed.

FM was moving up beneath the ship, polishing as she went. I realized then that everyone was soaking—except her. Somehow she always avoided getting hit. While I, if present, generally ended up the most wet.

Naturally, I always took someone down with me.

“Hey, Mask,” FM said. “Your people used to visit ours, right? Long ago? I’ve talked to Juno about it.”

“The lorekeeper?” Hesho asked. “How do you know him?”

“He and Jorgen hang out a lot,” FM said.

“I wasn’t aware that Juno ‘hung out’ as a general rule,” Hesho said.

“Well, he calls it ‘training,’ but I think they just like to chat,” FM said. “He was really helpful when Jorgen trained to cut things in half with his mind.”

“As one does,” Nedd said.

“I wish *I* could cut things in half with my mind,” Sadie said, still hanging upside down. “It would make it *so much easier* to get my rations open. Why do they seal the field rations so tight?”

“I doubt Jorgen uses his powers for such mundane things, Sentry,” Kimmalyne said.

I didn’t contradict her.

“Anyway, Mask,” FM said. “I’ve been thinking. You’ve been flying with Spensa, right?”

“It is my privilege to join her in the cockpit,” he answered. “And I believe I’ve been of service, helping her navigate and monitor controls while in combat.”

“And Jorgen flew with Juno,” FM said. “Juno helped him learn to meditate.”

“Jorgen learned meditation?” I said. “While...in battle?” I hadn’t heard that part.

“Basically, yeah,” FM said. She squatted down beside where Hesho, Nedd, and I worked. “I’ve been looking at schematics. We build our ships the size we do for a reason. They’re optimized—just big enough to maintain maneuverability and to carry large enough guns for damage.”

“Indeed,” Hesho said. “When we started building our own starships, we initially began with much smaller designs, scaled to our size. However, we found that they lacked the necessary firepower to be meaningful on the galactic stage. We eventually settled on designs not much different in size from your own.”

“Many species have ended up with the same sizes of ships,” she said, excited.

Scud. “You’ve been thinking the same thing I have!” I said, pointing to her.

“Furry copilots?” she asked.

“Furry copilots.”

“What?” Nedd asked.

“Most of the ships we build are one-person vessels,” FM explained. “Two-seaters sacrifice speed for the extra bulk, so we don’t generally use them as interceptors. But having a copilot is probably super useful.”

“It is,” I said. “Part of the reason I was so good when flying M-Bot’s old ship was that he could take over some of the duties for me, monitoring proximity, giving me a heads-up on ships coming our way. It’s been incredibly useful to have Hesho doing the same duties.”

“Yes,” Hesho said softly, “having a second pilot who does not take up much space—and can be fit into a normal cockpit without modifications—is a huge advantage to Spensa and me.”

“Exactly!” FM said. “Do you think any of the others in your fleet would be interested in trying it out?”

“I know many who would love to do so,” Hesho said. “Our officer training involves a lot of redundant positions on various stations; we have junior staff who are eager for combat and status, but who rarely get a chance. I think, if you were to approach the proper heads of the military and state, this idea would eagerly be accepted.”

“Heads of state, eh?” Nedd said, whacking the now-clean landing gear with his rag. Scud, it felt so wonderful to see him again, and for him to be taking his injury in stride. But what else had I expected from Nedd? “Hey Spin, what position in line do you think I am for head of *our* government?”

“None,” I said flatly. “You are *not* in line.”

“Sure I am,” Nedd said. “The DDF isn’t *actually* that large. What are we...six thousand people? And now the military is in direct command. I’m a lieutenant, so...”

Oh, scud. He was right. I’d never really thought of it, but technically, Nedd *was* in the chain of command.

Kimmalyn grabbed her datapad with a mischievous grin. “One admiral of the fleet...four vice admirals...currently nine rear admirals...captains, commanders, lieutenant commanders. Let’s assume every lieutenant is ahead of Nedd...”

“Well?” FM said, still squatting nearby. “What is the horrible verdict?”

“One hundred and seventeenth,” she admitted. “In line for command of the DDF—which, until we organize another national assembly, is the *de facto* ruling body of the planet.”

“In my government you’d be the equivalent of a senatorial body head, Nedder,” Hesho offered. “A very senior and distinguished position, fit for a master poet such as yourself.”

“Hell yeah!” he said.

“Saint help us if it came to that,” Arturo said.

“You’d be dead,” Kimmalyn said. “Since you’re ahead of him in the line of succession.”

“Well, you’d have that going for you at least,” Alanik said, giving Nedd a smile and setting down a fresh bucket of soapy water for him.

“‘I’ll beat thee,’” Nedd quoted, hand to his chest, “‘but I would infect my hands.’”

I glanced at Hesho, who still hovered next to the group of us underneath the front fuselage of the ship. How was he taking this?

He looked from Nedd to the others, then—remarkably—took off his mask and set it beside him. A grin marked his snout as he leaned forward. “ ‘ ’Twas not a friend, and not a foe, who did besmirch thee—but merely a foul wind, not worthy of retort.’ ”

“Oh!” Nedd said. “I don’t know that one!”

“It’s from one of our poets,” Hesho said. “My great-great-great grandfather was a playwright. And fond of insults.”

“Scud!” Nedd said. “A kitsen Shakespeare? Can I read his stuff?”

“It would be my greatest honor to share it with you. Then you will have an entirely new repertoire of poetic deprecations at your disposal.”

“Awesome,” Nedd said, raising his fist to Hesho. “Fight the man.”

“The man?” Hesho asked.

“Him, mostly,” Nedd said, indicating Arturo. “Except when he pays for snacks. Then he’s not the man, he’s *the man*.”

“The intricacies of your language are indeed intriguing,” Hesho said. “Do you know of any other human poets that I should investigate?”

“Unfortunately our archives are super fragmented,” Nedd said. “But there was this legendary poet named David Bowie, who may or may not have actually been real...”

The two continued chatting as I stepped away from the ship and stretched. Feeling thirsty, I wandered over to the water station, and Kimmalyn joined me a moment later.

“Did you bring Hesho,” she said, “just to try to get him to open up to us?”

I nodded, surprised she’d been able to read me that well. “You all got through to me,” I said. “I figured Hesho can’t be that much harder.”

“That was compassionate of you, Spin,” Kimmalyn said. “Hesho must feel so much loss, being cast from his position as he was.”

“He wasn’t cast from it,” I explained, watching Hesho speak animatedly to Nedd and the others. “He chose. But it’s still hard on him. I thought maybe he needed some more friends.”

“Smart,” Kimmalyn said. Then looked at me, thoughtfully.

“You’re going to remind me—yet again—that you’re here for me if I need you?” I said. “Right?”

“Damn straight,” she said, squeezing my arm. “I heard you took a plan to Jorgen. You wanted to attack right now?”

I nodded.

“But we’re not going to?” Kimmalyn said.



I shook my head.

“How are you doing with that?”

“Strangely fine,” I said, meeting her brown eyes. “I talked to Hesho earlier, and...well, I think I’m going to be all right letting Jorgen lead.”

Kimmalyyn smiled. She didn’t head back to the others immediately though. She leaned against the water station, giving me space by not demanding more answers, but also staying near.

Though I hadn’t made any conscious decisions, I felt as if the matter was resolved. I wasn’t going to run off on my own this time; Hesho was right. More profoundly, this *team* was right. Felt right. This was my home.

I’d been away for too long, but being here—watching my friends laugh, knowing they were watching out for me—I felt a warmth that was in direct contrast to the strange feelings of loss I’d been experiencing. Like light in a cavern beating back the darkness, their presence changed me. Us. Chet felt it too.

For my whole life I’d believed I just needed to fly. That was what I’d hunted, what had driven me. But in the end, that wasn’t what actually mattered most.

I gave Kimmalyyn a smile. “Things are coming together for me. Finally. Thank you for being patient. For now...what if we went and invited Shiver and Dllllizzzz to join us? I bet they’re feeling out of place and lonely too. They’re pilots, and being around ships and people working on them might be comforting.”

Kimmalyyn grinned, and so we told the others, then went to check on the two resonants. They’d been assigned quarters nearby, and after knocking and getting permission, we entered to find the two crystalline beings sitting in chairs. The rooms weren’t furnished with much, but I doubted that mattered to the resonants. More tellingly, though, their crystals hadn’t expanded far. They’d barely grown around the chairs, which indicated to me that they weren’t comfortable here.

“Spin!” Shiver said. “I was hoping you’d come. Dllllizzzz is getting even better!”

Dllllizzzz sent me images I couldn't quite parse. Empty caverns. A lonely crystal. But a rising sun as well, sparkling through a tunnel full of different kinds of crystals. I took it in. And thought maybe it meant she was happy. But still there was the impression that she was also missing something.

"We were just wondering if you two wanted to come see some of our starfighters," I said to them. "We're doing maintenance on them now, and I figured it would be a good time."

"Really?" Shiver asked. "You'd let us? We're aliens, former pirates, Spin. Surely we don't belong."

"You'd be surprised," Kimmalyn said with a warm smile. "We've lived our entire lives short-staffed. If you can fly and are willing, you're welcome. If you want, I can even talk to command about getting you commissions."

"No need to commit to something like that," I said quickly. "The offer to take you home to your caverns once this is over still stands. We can probably hyperjump you there."

I got hit with an immediate set of visualizations from Dllllizzzz. The sky. The wind. The fragments of the nowhere. Soaring. It was self-explanatory.

Once you'd had that, going back to a few caverns wasn't an option. Scud, how had I ever thought otherwise? After a quick call to command for permission, we brought the two resonants to join the others. And interestingly, it was Hesho who spoke to them first, welcoming them in as Nedd had welcomed him.

They would fit right into the flight, I was certain. I'd push for it, as I had this feeling that the more different types of people we got into the flight, the stronger it would be.

I watched them for a moment, but there was one more thing to do. As I'd realized earlier, I wanted my friends to help build M-Bot's new body. They would love it, and the activity would give us a further chance to bond with Hesho and the resonants.

I vanished and reappeared in the cavern, startling Doomslug, who had wanted to stay when we'd left. She fluted at me from where she'd snuggled in on the table, seeming content and happy there. The taynix might have enjoyed being with us humans, but for them, these musty caverns felt like home. And that was just fine.

I gave her a scritch on the head and along her flutes, before putting my hands on my hips and looking at the mess Hesho and I had made of these parts. I'd have to pile them all up, then hyperjump them back up into the hangar. Or maybe it would just be easier to bring everyone down here?

Seeing it all there, unfortunately, gave me a moment of panic. It reminded me of when I'd discovered M-Bot torn apart on Starsight, and the feelings of panic and sorrow I'd felt at losing him. I was struck by a disorientation, and the air started to warp around me. A metal cup from the hangar—the one I'd been drinking out of—dropped out of midair and clanged to the ground.

Fighting the episode down was easier this time. The effects of having been around the others lingered with me, and I was proud of how well I handled the sudden panic. Indeed, everything seemed fine.

Right up until the moment Doomslug fluted in alarm. A second later, something hit me from behind. An electric bolt of energy that coursed through my body, leaving me weak and trembling as I dropped to the hard stone. Doomslug's fluting trailed off abruptly.

A new panic arose in me. What was happening? I tried to move, but I'd been stunned, my muscles flexing and unflexing uncontrollably. I even started drooling—though my eyes worked fine, and so I could see clearly when someone grabbed me by the shoulder and turned me over.

Brade. Wearing black combat gear and a flak jacket, backed up by five soldiers in similar gear, holding assault rifles.

"Good," Brade said. "It's her."

One of the others was holding a limp Doomslug in their arms. I tried to struggle, froth bubbling at my lips. If they'd hurt her...

Brade looked up as the air warped again. Something crashed to the ground nearby, and pieces of the table vanished. Then, oddly, she smiled.

“Leave the note,” she said to one of the soldiers. “You, squeeze that slug.”

He squeezed Doomslug, and I panicked further. The air warped again, and only then did I realize what Brade was doing. When I broke the air apart in my wave of panic, it had opened a path through our inhibitors—which had let her slip in. And not just in my mind this time. She was physically here. And by hurting Doomslug, they were making me panic more—which opened a pathway for them to escape.

I tried to clamp down on it, but I was too slow. Brade hauled me up and over her shoulder, then the other soldiers each put a hand on her arm.

A second later we hyperjumped away—and I felt a sudden spike of dread. Not just because I was now in enemy hands, but because I knew what everyone was going to think.

They’d assume that I had gone off on my own again. I wasn’t merely in serious danger—I’d likely just broken the hearts of Jorgen and my other friends yet again.

# PART THREE

## 23

We appeared in a round room with screens all along a back wall. I vaguely recognized it; I'd seen Brade and Winzik in here once while spying on them from the nowhere. Then, it had been filled with officials and generals listening to Winzik; now it was empty save for the varvax himself.

Tall in his suit made of sandstone—a blocky and modern version of ancient knight's armor—the *real* Winzik was the crablike creature floating in the liquid behind the helmet's glass faceplate. The varvax had learned to craft a stronger shell material early in their technological development, which eventually was developed into this type of suit. Just as making steel had come early during human development.

Brade dropped me onto the floor in front of Winzik like a prized stag slain during the hunt. I flopped onto my back, drooling as she waved proudly toward me, an intolerable grin on her face.

"Done!" she said. "I told you I could manage it."

"My, my," Winzik said, waving his armored arms as he knelt down on one stone knee beside me. Varvax spoke with their hands as much as with their voices, which were projected from the front of their suits. "So careless with our guest, Brade. So brutal."

"Yeah," Brade said, "wait until she rips your face off with a mindblade."

"I have ten different inhibitors in here," Winzik said, gesturing in a way that felt indifferent. "I still think we should have waited to see if she'd come to you willingly to duel."

"She wasn't going to," Brade said. "I could feel it. Better to strike when I sensed she was alone."

I focused on her, and felt the unnatural sense of disconnect rising from me again. The trembling distortion. Loss and pain. This time I stoked those emotions, remembering M-Bot's body torn apart, and the moment of panic I'd felt when thinking he was dead.

The room shook like a meteor had hit nearby. *Screws* began to rain down like chips of stone from a crumbling cavern ceiling. Hundreds of them, stolen from somewhere by my powers to tumble down through the room and rattle and click against the metal surfaces.

Winzik leaped to his feet and shied backward, waving sandstone hands anxiously. Whatever it was I'd become, I could rip through their inhibitor fields, just like I'd ripped a hole in ours. If Brade could sneak into Detritus to get me, then I could get right back out. As the air continued to undulate and warp around me, I reached out with my mind. My infirm body, still stunned, didn't need to be—

Brade knelt beside me and rammed something into my neck. A syringe? I tried to snap at her fingers with my mouth, but only succeeded in blowing a few bubbles in my drool. She watched me, genuine worry on her face, until the warping subsided.

*No!* I thought, trying to focus on my pain, on the loss, the anguish. It was still there, but now it didn't *do* anything. The room settled, a last spurt of bolts falling from the air before all grew still.

*Chet?* I thought at the delver in my soul.

No response.

*Chet! M-Bot? Anyone?*

Somehow, whatever they'd drugged me with had cut me off from them, and the nowhere, completely. It was as if I wasn't even cytonic.

Brade exhaled in relief, then a confident smile reappeared on her lips and she became the lounging, cocky fighter she always seemed to be around Winzik. A completely different persona from the stoic, troubled loner she'd shown me and my flight at Starsight.

I was *certain* she'd been genuinely worried for a moment. She hadn't known if that drug she'd given me would work or not. Unfortunately, it had. My cytonic senses were completely closed off. It didn't feel the way an

inhibitor did. That felt like pushing against a wall with my mind. Now it felt like there was nothing to push against. And I couldn't generate any kind of force to try.

What had they done? What *was* that stuff they'd injected into me? It wouldn't be permanent, would it?

"I warned you she would still be dangerous," Brade said, stepping back as Winzik approached. "Kapling, store that slug with the others. The rest of you, outside."

The soldiers who had arrived with her backed away, one with Doomslug still in his arms. I had a single bit of solace; they didn't seem to know that Doomslug was my friend, not just a tool. Her panicked fluting broke my heart, but there was nothing I could do. I could barely twitch my head.

"My, my," Winzik said, his voice low, gestures subdued. "It does work on humans. Good, good."

I felt something deeper, more potent than my pain. Anger. *Fury* at this creature, boiling inside of me. That little monster behind the faceplate, always so prim and calculating. He was the one who had kept my people imprisoned on Detritus. He was responsible for my father's death. The jail warden who had tried to exterminate my planet to prove he was tough. When his plot to use delvers as a weapon had failed, he'd blamed the disaster on us, and had used that fear of Detritus—of humans—to execute his coup.

Even now, he ruled because he had *us* as a boogeyman. So much death, so much destruction, so many lies. All so this *thing* could rise through the ranks. I'd almost have respected him if he were a warrior. But the sad, humiliating truth was that our world hadn't been dominated for years by some ruthless warlord, but by a bureaucrat who knew how to manipulate public opinion.

That revelation about the workings of the universe, more than anything else, enraged me. I snarled softly, and Winzik waved his hands and looked to Brade.

"You didn't stun her enough, Brade," he said. "She should have been unconscious before you brought her here."



“We needed her conscious to get back, Winzik,” Brade said. “And you needed to see what she’s capable of doing. There’s something’s *very* strange about her. That’s why the delvers are frightened of her. Not just because she’s a powerful cytonic. She’s moved beyond that somehow. She has powers *like* a delver...”

“Take her away!” Winzik said.

“I recommend against that,” Brade said. “We should talk to her. She’ll listen to me.”

“She’s too dangerous,” Winzik said. “My, my! I stood in the same room with her when she hid among us. She was unbound, undrugged. So discomfoting to think about!”

“At least let me show the delvers we have her,” Brade said. “They’ll want to know.”

Scud. A piece of all this clicked into place. Their pact with the delvers required them to deal with me specifically. That was why Brade had tried to goad me into dueling her, why they’d grabbed me. They needed me as a bargaining chip.

My fears were validated as Brade turned to the side and her eyes unfocused. I felt a distant *buzzing*—she was reaching into the nowhere. If I hadn’t been drugged, I’d have felt this more powerfully. As it was, I hoped the buzzing meant that my abilities would eventually return—that they were merely deadened for the time being.

The air began warping, which made Winzik grow more agitated—though perhaps it was excitement. Brade reached down and hauled me up by the front of my jumpsuit. Being that close to her let me see better, sense better. Winzik’s round conference room faded somewhat, almost becoming incorporeal, and white spots opened all around me. The eyes. The delvers.

*See*, Brade said cytonically, projecting to them vigorously enough that I could hear it. *Here is your proof.*

“We have her,” Winzik said, and Brade relayed his words to the delvers. “As promised. You needn’t fear! My, my. It was always a given that we would deliver on our contract with you.”

I felt the delvers' reactions as impressions. Fear. Anger. A latent pain that was thinly covered over—like a coat of paint trying to hide the old squadron insignia on the side of a starship. That was for me.

Unfortunately, they sent something else to Winzik. Pleasure. Agreement.

"We have made good on our side of the deal," Winzik said. "Are you willing to move forward with yours?"

Maybe. Probably. I could feel their response.

"Maybe? *Probably?*" Winzik said. He could obviously feel it too. I got the sense that the reason I felt any of this was because anyone would have been able to. My cytonics deadened, I was no more sensitive than an ordinary person.

*There are others like her, maybe? They could hurt us?*

"There are none," Winzik promised.

They withdrew. But not before indicating that they would consider. That they were willing. A contradiction that was hard to sort out, as their minds didn't quite work the way a human would anticipate. They hated the somewhere. Even coming here to destroy us was painful, dangerous, something they only did when forced to. That was why attacks were so rare.

Still, as they vanished, I was left with an impression. As long as Winzik held me, he had power over them. They would eventually do as he wanted. Their hatred of the somewhere would be overcome by their fear of me, of what I'd become.

Brade stopped reaching into the nowhere, and my anger and dread turned to nausea. If my friends launched any attacks, they would be in danger of facing delvers. Yet here I was, not only unable to warn them, but unable to even *roll over*.

"Take her away," Winzik said, calling to the guards outside of the room.

"But—" Brade said.

"No," he said. "No talking to her. She's too dangerous. She will only trick us as she did before. She has to be isolated, Brade. My, my. You must control your aggression. Please remember we will rule not by *force* but through *cunning*."

Brade fell silent, dropping me painfully to the ground and folding her arms. A moment later, the guards dragged me away.

I was starting to get control of my body again—my fingers twitching—when they tossed me into a bleak cell. Then slammed the door shut with a discouraging *thump*.

## 24

All right.

All right, I could *fix this*.

The first thing I did was drool some more. This time by choice. I focused on my lips, on moving them, on drooling from one side of the mouth, then the other. Drool by accident, and that's embarrassing. Drool on purpose, and it's just the thirst for battle overwhelming you.

Yes, that sounded silly even to me, but I needed something to focus on. You can give quarter to a worthy foe, but despair has never fit that description.

Eventually, with a growl, I managed to stop drooling entirely. A short time later, I'd recovered enough to force myself into a seated position. From there, I meditated on the various things I was going to do to Winzik. It was convenient he came with such a nice trophy. I'd display that exosuit proudly in my trophy room. Which, granted, I didn't have yet. But still, I would make one where I could place the semi-corpse of my greatest foe.

*That's right, I told myself, focus on the anger, the determination. Not on the fact that everyone at home is going to think you abandoned them. Not on the fact that the enemy is gathering their strength, and has a deal with the delvers because you handed them—in yourself—the key to facilitating that...*

I managed to stand. I felt like Norgay and Hillary summiting for the first time, proudly overlooking the view from the top of the tallest mountain in the world. I was able to walk off the rest of the stun; the more I worked my body, the faster it seemed to retreat.

Unfortunately, the drug they'd given me to inhibit my cytonic abilities was separate from the stun gun and was still in effect. Good thing my people hadn't known about this stuff; they'd probably have put it in the water back in the day, terrified of the "defect" that might strike us. I continued to walk my cell, trying to figure out a plan. It was small, with a bunk, an exposed lavatory, and a solid steel door. Through a jammed-open slat at the top I could see two guards in a hallway outside.

Only two? Someone was underestimating me.

*Keep thinking like that, I told myself. You can do this. They didn't capture you. They brought a tiger into their camp. Make them regret it.*

But how? I couldn't attempt to force the door—I didn't want the guards to know I was mobile yet. And so far as I could tell, the lock was solid. I could pretend I was a tiger, but I couldn't chew my way through steel.

A part of me had always wanted to dig myself a tunnel out of prison, like in the stories, but that didn't work so well when you were in a modern facility with walls made of solid sheets of cold metal. The lavatory offered no opportunities I could see. Even if I could break the toilet free or rip off the sink, that wouldn't make a hole I could fit through. And there weren't any loose parts on the bunk that I could use as tools.

I was going to have to brains my way out of this, not brawn it. I had to admit, it kind of sucked for the galaxy that its fate kept depending on whether or not I could be diplomatic. For once, couldn't I scudding *headbutt* my way out of a dire situation?

Well, I could see no other option. So I barfed.

I'd worried it would be difficult, but I was still woozy from whatever they'd done to me. And this at least was a mere matter of physical and mental fortitude. With a little effort shoving my finger down my throat, I got my sandwich to come back up and paint the floor.

I left the mess and settled back on the bunk, roughing up my hair and clothing, then I started groaning. It worked. A moment later, one of the guards checked at the slot in the door.

I heard a muffled conversation outside, in the dione tongue, my pin interpreting.

“The stunbreak should have worn off by now.”

“I hate those things. They don’t work right on some species.”

“What should we do?”

*Call a doctor*, I begged in my mind. *Not Brade. Please.*

“Send for the medic.”

I exhaled. *Yes! It worked!*

I lay there, waiting, making plaintive noises and ignoring the stench as best I could—but eventually the smell of it made me throw up again, this time involuntarily. I was pretty sure that a guard was watching that time though, so I felt proud of my body’s warrior instincts.

I lay back down, forcibly containing my excitement. I could take down some spindly medic. I just needed to grab them, hold them, and use them as a shield. Then I could manipulate the situation and get a gun from the guards. From there I could make my way to—

The door clanged open.

Revealing a two-meter-tall hulking monster of a burl—covered in fur and built with arms like artillery cannons—with a tiny medic’s hat.

Well, scud.

I took a deep breath. I abandoned the human shield idea, and would instead take my chances with the guards. As the burl drew close to my bunk, I flung my legs to the side, slamming them into the backs of his knees. He stumbled into the upchuck on the floor, then slid and collapsed.

I was out the door a second later, tackling the guard who had stepped up to check on us. They went down with a cry. The Superiority’s troops weren’t generally experienced. They could drill and perform their station duties—which made them dangerous enough in spaceship combat—but they hadn’t done much actual fighting.

So this guard went down, and I managed to roll us as the second guard pulled out a nonlethal weapon and fired it—right into the first guard’s back. Human shield after all! Well, dione shield. I wiggled free as the first guard shook and contorted. Then I dodged another shot by a hair and leaped for the second guard, getting in close enough to grab their arm and twist it, causing them to scream and drop their gun.

I went for the weapon and shot them in the chest—stunning them—then immediately heard a click behind me. I froze, then glanced over my shoulder to see Brade lounging by the wall, holding a gun on me—a destructor, none of this nonlethal nonsense—in one hand. In the other hand she held the stopwatch she had clicked.

“Twelve and a half minutes,” she said.

I growled softly. She gestured with the gun, indicating I should drop my weapon. I didn’t, though I also didn’t turn it on her. Unlike the two buffoons I’d just downed, Brade would not be an easy opponent. The door to my cell swung open as the medic—covered with what had been my lunch—lumbered out. He wilted visibly at the sight of Brade.

“I even warned him,” she told me, “and you still got out. Not bad.”

I hesitated there, gun in hand. I wanted to go for her, but...the chances of surviving that were low. What good would I do anyone if I died here in the hallway? With a stab of regret, I dropped the stun gun.

Brade backed up to the next cell in line, then pulled it open. She waved me in, and after I complied, she slammed it shut. “I’m keeping this stopwatch as a reminder,” she said, peeking through the slot in the door. “I’d guessed it would take you over an hour. Nice work.”

“You want real motivation, Brade?” I said. “Let me out. Let’s have that duel you promised me.”

She didn’t reply, but neither did she back away.

“Let’s see who’s really better,” I hissed at her. “You and me. In starships. You want to know. I can *feel* it in you.”

She slammed the slot in the door closed and I slumped down onto my new bunk, feeling the fatigue after an adrenaline high coming on. I flopped back, groaning softly.

“Idiots.” Brade’s voice echoed from the hallway. “You get to clean up that mess as punishment, while I see if I can find *any* soldiers in this division who aren’t utterly incompetent. Nobody opens her door for *any* reason. Scrud, I can’t believe I even have to make that rule. What is wrong with you all?”

She stalked off, and a short time later my new guards arrived—ten of them this time. I almost felt respected.

Unfortunately, these guards actually listened to Brade. I tried several more ploys to get them to open the door. Since playing sick had failed, I tried bribery, pretending there was something mysterious in my room, going silent for an extended period, pretending that I'd gotten a hatch open and was about to escape...everything from every story I had heard, and a few I made up on my own.

That door didn't open again.

I tried prying off panels, working at the lock, and even attempted to rip off the sink. When that failed, I clogged the drain and flooded my room. Again, nobody opened the door. All I managed was getting my feet wet.

Hours later I lay there, sullen, arms aching from trying to force the door. *M-Bot?* I tried, for about the hundredth time. *M-Bot, can you hear me?* If I could reach him, maybe he could talk to Gran-Gran or Jorgen and tell them what had happened.

I got no response. My powers were blocked. Though...this time it did feel different. Not a recovery of my cytonics, but some kind of distant...attention? I wasn't certain what else I could call it. Awareness was seeping back into my mind.

Maybe the drug was wearing off? How long had I been in here? I was exhausted, and had slept for maybe an hour or so in the middle of my various escape ploys. This gave me hope—and I reached out again, toward that awareness. Scud, I hoped I wasn't reaching for Brade. It didn't feel like her. In fact, it felt like...

An impression. Of being in a box. Of fear, and pain, and loneliness. And a faint familiarity. It was the slug who I'd contacted earlier, during the supply depot mission. The communications slug who had asked me to save her friends.

She was somewhere nearby. My senses couldn't extend as far as they had before, and were limited by the drug's hampering effect. Which meant...



Which meant I was likely at or near Evensong—the platform where they kept their communications slugs. That made sense. This was where Winzik planned to gather his forces, so he'd want to be there to supervise. They had brought me right into the heart of their operation.

The slug gave me a thrilled little mental trill. Evensong. That was right. I was close, and she was there with thousands upon thousands of others like her. Trapped, imprisoned, enslaved.

She thought I'd come to rescue her. As I'd promised.

I winced, trying to project confidence, then to ask if she could communicate with Doomslug. Unfortunately, at that moment my door clicked.

What?

The door was opening. Were they bringing food?

It didn't matter. I grinned wildly and leaped for it, ready to attack whoever entered. I got halfway across the small room before a barrage of weapons fire slammed into me.

Stun guns. All ten of the guards had been ready to fire on me the moment the door opened. I flopped to the ground like a fish out of water, humiliated. Then they shot me *again*.

*Scudding wretches!* I'd stab them in the scudding eyes once I was out of here. I'd...

I'd...

I'd simply lie there as they injected me with a new syringe of drugs. One guard deposited a few field rations on the bunk, then they left, locking the door securely behind them. Leaving me, face down, to slowly recover enough to move.

I fell unconscious before that could happen, my exhausted body surrendering to the need for sleep.

## 25

I woke to a feeling of peace.

That didn't make any kind of rational sense. I knew immediately where I was: in prison. I was a light sleeper, and at some point during the "night" had climbed up onto the bunk.

And yet a soothing calm radiated over me. It came from...

*You*, I thought to the unknown slug.

She fluted in my head. The communications slug I'd promised to save. As I lay there, feeling sorry for myself, she sent more comfort. Like a bandage on my soul.

*How do you have time to comfort someone else?* I thought to her. *With your own situation as it is?*

I could mostly frame the feelings and images she sent into a verbal response. *I'm locked in a cage. I have nothing but time. And outward is the only place to look.*

I sent back a sense of regret. That I wasn't here to save her; that I hadn't come willingly. But she'd already figured that out, from my emotions. I was a captive like she was.

*Sorry*, I sent again.

Wait. I was communicating with the taynix. Did that mean my powers were back? The drug had worn off? I quested outward, but felt nothing.

She replied. She was reaching out to me while doing her communications work for the space station. My drugs were still in effect; she was bearing the entire cytonic load of our discussion. She had a vague impression that my state would last around twelve hours.

*You know the drugs?* I sent her.

Yes. They were used on hyperslugs whenever they needed to be removed from their boxes. It was also the first step in a punishment process for a commslug—cutting them off from others.

Scud. If the drug was the *first* step of their punishments, where did it go after that?

I got back a sensation of darkness, pain, and silence.

Well, that was terrifying. If I ever needed to throw up again on command, I could simply remember the life these poor creatures were being forced to live.

*Doomslug*, I sent her. *Can you find my friend? She's here, somewhere.*

The unknown slug, whom I named Comfort in my head, didn't know *Doomslug*, but promised to see if she could find her. There were a *lot* of slugs here, but Comfort seemed confident that—with a little time—she could do it.

Great. But all of this just reinforced that I needed a way out. Not only for me and my friends, but for these creatures.

I climbed off the bunk and ate the ration bars left for me, did a series of push-ups and other exercises, then cleaned up as best I could. With a sink and the little bar of soap I'd been left, at least I could wash my jumpsuit.

Once the jumpsuit was dry, I put it back on, then cleaned my undergarments. It gave me something to do while I waited for the next injection. Sure enough, at what I pegged for midday, they opened the door. Cleaned and dressed, I raised my hands to try to forestall what happened next.

"I'll be good," I promised. "I won't—"

A barrage of fire came through the doorway, stunning me and dropping me, drooling, to the ground. Scud. It didn't hurt—at least not more than any other fall—but this could *not* be good for my body. I suffered the indignity of another injection, then just lay there. They didn't even move me to the bunk, though they left another handful of ration bars. One joked about how bad the food was, and how I'd probably go crazy subsisting only on those bars.

Well, the joke was on him. I'd lived on rat meat and algae paste for most of my life. The ration bars were comparatively fantastic.

As I lay there, feeling miserable, Comfort reached out for me again. And oddly, I felt several others—a good five or six communication slugs doing the same. When I asked, Comfort said she'd talked to them about me, and asked for their help in finding my friend.

Their mental picture of me was amusing: a giant slug with long, squishy appendages. They saw me as one of them, just larger and oddly shaped. In context it was flattering, trust me. And only mildly nightmarish.

*Any sign of Doomslug?* I thought to them. And yes—one of the five had sensed a new slug arriving.

The Superiority didn't understand the level of intelligence the taynix had. That was what happened when you treated living beings like mechanical parts—one was the same as another to them. So they'd just put Doomslug with the rest of their hyperslugs.

She couldn't be contacted, though. It took me a few minutes of sorting through Comfort's thoughts to figure out why. Apparently it was the boxes. Certain boxes could cut the slugs off from one another. But they were transferred often enough, fed and sometimes cleaned, so Comfort expected Doomslug would be contactable sometime in the next few days. She promised to send my friend feelings of support, as did the other five who were talking to me. All were on active communications duty.

*This is how you survive,* I thought to them. *You do it together. Supporting each other.*

They agreed softly, as they offered me that same support. I was awed by the scope of it. The idea of all these little creatures in cages, barely fed, beaten if they misbehaved...spending their days reaching out. Instead of looking inward, they'd created a network of support. Facilitated through the communications slugs.

It was a deeply powerful defiance that vibrated my soul.

*I'll help you,* I sent to them. *I'm going to find a way. Spread the word. Help is coming.*

They believed me immediately, and began to flute with excitement. The question was, how did I make good on that promise?

Turned out, it was right there in front of me. I mean, not *literally*, since I was lying face down in a pool of my own spit. But you know. Metaphorically.

*Can you reach out*, I thought to the slugs, *to my friends?*

Immediate fear. Disobedience was severely punished. They felt fine contacting me, since they viewed me as “one of them.” The Superiority didn’t seem to know they did this, and didn’t have the resources to monitor it. But if any of them sent a message that far, to another planet, they risked alerting the Superiority’s guards. Signals sent out from the station were monitored carefully by machinery.

*I understand*, I thought to them as they shrank back from me in fear. Only, Comfort prodded at my mind tentatively. She wanted to know what she needed to do.

I managed to roll over and stare at the ceiling. *It might not be a good idea*, I thought to her. *It could be dangerous.*

She sent an image of me flying in combat, as I had during the data-breach mission. She’d been watching from afar.

*Well, yes*, I projected to her. *I do dangerous things. But I’m a soldier.*

*I’m a soldier*, she repeated back to me, and I could almost hear the fluting.

I supposed she was. Not by choice—but none of my people were soldiers by choice. Except maybe me, granted. I could have grown up in the most pacifist society in the Superiority, and I’d probably still be talking about beheading dandelions or something.

*Okay*, I sent back to her. *I have friends in the military. Did you see any of them, when we were flying that mission?*

Comfort wasn’t certain. She had trouble distinguishing humans from one another unless they were cytonic, as her kind sensed the world with their powers. All taynix—regardless of variety—could use cytonics to produce an image of their surroundings in their heads. Yet they recognized one another not by visuals, but through cytonic identifiers.

So I sent her an image, and a cytonic impression, of Jorgen. I'd talked to him on that mission. Did she know him?

*Yes*, she sent back, timid. She recognized *that* human. He was a giant slug too. I smiled at the image.

*Can you reach out to him?* I thought. *Tell him where I am, and that I was taken against my will?* That alone wouldn't be enough to salvage this situation, but it would be a start. More, I wanted to see if I could get word out. From there, plans could be made. And perhaps we could find a way free of this mess.

Comfort sent me back a scared affirmative. Her captors didn't always monitor communications perfectly, and she'd learned to piggyback on signals she sent. It was how she sometimes contacted slugs who were frightened and separated from the rest. She thought maybe, while on duty, she could do this type of spoofing—and send a double signal. One she was assigned to send, and a hidden one to Jorgen.

As I read her thoughts, I could feel the scars of a lifetime of abuse in her emotions, and it broke my heart anew. Scud, I'd thought *my* childhood had been hard, but I'd had the freedom to explore the caverns and a potential way to fight back against the Krell.

I hadn't realized how dark it could get for someone without those options.

*I try*, Comfort sent.

*Now?* I asked.

*On duty*, she sent. *Sending thoughts now. Good time.*

With that, Comfort reached toward Jorgen, as I'd asked. I wished I could watch with my cytonic senses. Instead, the best I could do was feel her emotions, since she had deliberately extended them to me. I could feel her growing more confident as—I thought—she located Jorgen. A big slug who always kept himself clean, and complained when others got a little messy. Yup, that was him. I delighted in the idea of explaining—

Comfort went silent.

I tried to sit up, but I still couldn't do more than wobble. I quested out for her, but my senses were blind. Why had she cut off from me? What was

wrong? The other slugs didn't reach out to me either; they'd hidden away. I finally managed to climb up onto my bunk, terrified for Comfort.

I lay there a long time, reaching for her, until the lock on my door clicked. I bolted upright, just in time to get shot with those stun guns *yet again*.

Scud, scud, SCUD.

This time, guards didn't come to sneer at me. I was favored today, because Winzik himself strolled in, stone feet grinding on the metallic floor. As usual, the only clothing he wore was a sash across his exosuit's body. He waved with his tiny crab claw, and the exosuit mimicked the motion, indicating that some guards should enter and prop me up against the wall in a semblance of a seated position.

Brade entered next and deposited a metal box on the floor. It was longer than it was tall, and maybe a little less than two feet across.

Winzik went down on one knee before me, then spoke in his soft, deliberate way. "They say I should keep you unconscious, human. We have drugs that could render you comatose. Unfortunately, I fear that the delvers would not recognize you—and the danger you present—in that state. They have difficulty telling the difference between us! My, my. They may mistake you for a log."

I tried to growl at him, or spit at his feet, or do *anything* heroic. He'd left me unable.

"Besides," he continued, "I feel that you can learn. All beings can learn, even humans. That is, in part, why I keep a trained one nearby. To remind people it's possible to tame even the most *abject* of lesser species. With sufficient motivation. Applied correctly."

He rested a hand on the box beside him, only centimeters from me. I heard, with horror, a panicked fluting inside.

No. He couldn't. He...

Winzik held his hand out to Brade, who passed him a small mechanical device: a control pad, it seemed.

"At times," he said, "one of our hyperdrive units or our communication units malfunctions. So we keep them in receptacles outfitted for easy

disposal.”

I struggled. Trying to move. Trying to show the least bit of defiance. I threw every ounce of strength and passion into it, then I piled on the desperation and pain that followed.

I got nothing.

“Winzik,” Brade said from behind. “This might not be wise. We want her pliable. She’ll work with us, under the right circumstances.”

“Of course she will, Brade,” he said. “My, my. You seem to be regressing. Because these *are* the circumstances where she’ll work with us. Once she is motivated.” He leaned forward. “You might call this aggressive. That is why you are of lesser intelligence. You do not yet see: It is not aggressive if it is done without malice. If it is done, instead, with regret. I regret what *you* have done. I regret that *you* are foolish. I regret that *you* have killed this frightened creature.”

I could hear Comfort fluting inside. More and more panicked. As if she knew. As if she understood.

My emotions mounted to a frenzy. I managed to combine them into a single vengeful burst of energy. Like a spear punching through armor.

It amounted to two words.

“Please. No.”

Winzik hesitated, then leaned even closer. He waved with a claw, gesturing a soldier forward to level his gun at me.

Then, satisfied, Winzik leaned back. “The tool in this box,” he said, “is corrupted. See that you don’t corrupt any others.”

He pushed a button on his pad.

The box flashed and rattled briefly, light leaking from the seams. A violent red light, like something from the forges. Smoke followed, with a terrible scent of burned flesh. And one final impression.

*Save my friends.*

After that, there was no more fluting.

My heart broke. I couldn’t move, but somehow I *could* cry. The tears running down my face seemed to please Winzik. He stood up, waving his hands animatedly.



“We can remove any of them that malfunction,” he said. “At any time. Remotely, if we wish. Please remember this before you seek to use them again. Brade warned me this might happen. We were therefore watching when this unit sent two signals instead of one.”

I managed to force out two more words, somehow.

“Kill. You.”

“My, my. There is such emotion in the lesser species.”

With that, he turned and left. Brade and the guards followed, then the door slammed. Locking me in alone with my agony, shame, and seething hatred.

Days passed.

I think.

Without a clock—without the visible changing of worker shifts, or something like the forges back home going from fabrication to the softer simmering of reclamation...well, it was tough to tell time. Almost like I was in the nowhere again.

The only way I had of tracking it was when my drugs were administered. Every twelve hours, using Old Earth time...maybe. I was relying on an unpracticed interpretation of a vague representation that Comfort had given me. And if *I* were holding a captive, I would have mixed up the length of time between doses—often coming when one wasn't needed—just to keep the captive disoriented. So I felt I couldn't rely on that, or feeding times—the arrival of fresh ration bars.

I quickly came to understand why solitude, in the stories, was often considered as terrible a punishment as physical torture. When I'd been captured by the Broadsiders, I'd been able to learn about them. Spend time around them. That had helped me formulate an escape. Here...any plan was just a way to temporarily distract myself from my mounting despair.

And that despair was acute.

I'd been outthought at each point. Brade had weaponized my tantrums—and the way they broke through inhibitors—almost before I'd realized what was happening. They'd anticipated each of my ploys to escape, and had been waiting for me. They'd been *ready* to kill Comfort.

I was supposed to have been able to save her.

Damn it, I was supposed to be the *hero*.

*Save my friends.*

Her dying plea vibrated my soul. Haunting me. But the drugs, whatever they were, cut me off from Chet. That meant no tantrum, no matter how painful for me, made the air around me warp. All along, that ability hadn't been mine, it seemed, but his—and this drug prevented our melding from functioning as it once had.

The only useful thing I could do was watch the guards. They were my lone viable access to the outside world. I hoped that listening to their conversations would give me some kind of intel. But unfortunately, intel was easier to get from people who were actually intelligent. These guards didn't seem to know anything relevant, and mostly talked about how bored they were. Still, I made notations about their shift changes, tying knots in my bedsheet to mark each one. I watched carefully, through the slot on the door, for any opportunities I could use.

They rotated in shifts of five—but two *overlapping* shifts of five. That meant ten were watching me most of the time. Occasionally five, but never zero.

By what I thought was the fourth day of my imprisonment, I'd started identifying individuals. One set in particular tended to go off shift a little early, consistently leaving only the other five watching. Maybe I could...

Maybe I could what? I pulled away from the door, feeling like an utter fool. It didn't matter. I'd tried every trick I could to get that door to open. The only time it did, it was followed by weapons fire. I'd tried hiding at the side of the room before they entered, but that time they'd tossed a gas grenade in, which nearly knocked me out, *then* they'd stunned me anyway and stuck me with the needle.

I was trapped, well and truly. With a sinking feeling, I finally understood how someone could spend decades in a prison and never escape, like in the stories. I'd always thought I would be clever, strong, or perceptive enough to get myself out of such a situation. Yet here I was, completely powerless. They could keep me in this cell until I died of old age. I slumped down on my bunk and bit into one of my rations.

My teeth *clinked* against something inside.

I pulled the ration bar back, staring at the shining bit of metal in the mashed-up protein paste. Scud. I had no idea what that was, but I suspected that they had a camera watching me somewhere in here, so I pretended nothing had happened. I flopped down on the bunk, rolled to my side, and there feigned nibbling on the bar. While secretly I figured out what was inside it.

A key. Not an old-fashioned one like in the stories, but an electronic one. You pressed it to the door, and the mechanism unlocked. I'd seen them on the guards' belts.

How in Genghis's bloody name had someone snuck me a key? And who would do such a thing?

*The guard shift*, I thought, listening to the movements outside. *Those five have left*. Early, as normal.

Could I take out the five who remained? One woman against five armed soldiers?

I knew I might never have another chance to find out. Maybe this was a trap, but either I tried to escape now, or I'd ride out the rest of the war in this little room. So I heaved a sigh, palmed the key, and sauntered over to the door. There, I pretended to be watching the guards like I usually did. I didn't open the door immediately. I waited, hoping that anyone watching via camera would grow lax.

I waited until the guards were chatting together, complaining about those *other* guards, who were so negligent they always left early. Then, guessing this was as distracted as they'd ever be, I pressed the key to the door—and felt the mechanism unlock.

Unfortunately, one of the guards noticed. So I revised my plan and waited until that one wandered over to look at the door, head cocked. Then I slammed the door open, shoving it right into their face.

The clank of metal on bone was one of the most satisfying sounds I'd ever heard. I was on the guard a second later, counting on the others to be too shocked to respond immediately. A part of me envied the relaxing lives they led, where even on guard duty they were distracted enough that they

could be taken by surprise. My life—full of explosions, sudden attacks, and dread—served me better that day.

As a few of them got their first shots off, spraying weapons fire erratically through the hallway, I knelt with the fallen guard's stun gun and laid into the remaining four. A barrage of tightly focused fire dropped them all in a single sweep. Even Veska, my firing range sergeant, wouldn't have complained about my form and precision.

Then I knelt there, heart pounding, holding my weapon and waiting for the inevitable alarm to sound. Surely a guard was watching remotely somewhere. They wouldn't solely rely on soldiers at the door, would they?

Silence.

Scud, what was happening? I couldn't trust this, could I? It was far too convenient.

But what else was I supposed to do? Sit in my bunk? Maybe the slugs had somehow managed to get me this key. I couldn't stew and worry it was a trap.

*Move, dummy!*

I grabbed the first guard—the one I'd hit in the face with the metal door—and hauled them up by their jacket. They were a dione, with blue skin and face tattoos, one of which had been split right down the middle by the edge of the door.

They were dazed, but coming to. So I pulled their face up close to mine and growled, "Hangar bay. Starfighters."

Their eyes widened and they smiled, an expression that on a dione did not mean amusement. They were terrified. Good.

"I'm not a patient woman," I hissed at them. "Tell me where the fighter bays are, or I'll have to get creative. How many pieces can a dione lose before they go into shock? Any ideas?"

"I...Please," the dione whispered.

"Hangar bay," I hissed. "Starfighters."

"Delm fourteen!"

Delm was one of their letters. Good enough. I shot the dione with the stun gun, then whipped the jacket off one of the smaller guards. I threw it

on and strung my stun rifle across it by the strap in a guard carry. Maybe I wouldn't strike as suspicious a silhouette this way. I identified the NCO of the fallen group by their uniform, then stole their ID—it looked a lot like the key my phantom helper had sent me.

I took off at an even stride, and after a few turns through the empty hallways I found a monitor on the wall that seemed like it was there to help with navigation. After all this time, I still didn't know much about the Superiority alphabets, but I managed—using the access key I'd stolen—to get “delm 14” typed in. To my relief, a map appeared, showing me the way.

I'd thought I was in some kind of space station, not a ground facility, and that was proven correct when a few turns later I found some portholes looking out at the silent expanse of space.

I continued down hallway after hallway, and fortunately didn't run into many people. The ones I spotted were at a distance, and my makeshift disguise seemed to work. I got the feeling that it was the station's main sleep cycle, which certainly made it easier to sneak around.

I was more than *halfway* to my destination before the alarm sounded. Those five guards who had left their shift early were likely going to have a *very* bad day.

I ran, praying I'd gotten the location correct—and came upon a tenasi, a female carrying a tray of food and humming to herself. I stunned her and she fell to the ground, then I leaped over the splattered mess of her meal, ran the final distance, and slammed my stolen guard's key to the pad beside a metal door. But it didn't open immediately. Scud, I hoped they hadn't already locked me out. I stood there in a panic, red lights flashing in the hallway and a distant alarm sounding.

At last the door opened. I leaped through to find a large hangar bay, Superiority-standard starships of a variety of designs sitting in a row. Despite the flashing lights and sounds of alarm, there was nobody in here. Wouldn't a hangar lockdown be one of their first moves after a security breach?

I hesitated, again worried this was a trap. As I did, I heard a click to the side.

Scud. I turned and raised my rifle, realizing I'd failed to check my corners after entering the room. Veska would have had something to complain about after all.

Brade lounged at an operator's seat by the wall just to my right, her booted feet up on a desk, stopwatch raised.

My stomach sank and I was hit by a wave of anger at seeing Brade with that scudding stopwatch yet again.

So I tried to shoot her. My weapon fire hit a shield that, until intercepting something, was invisible. It flashed blue before fading again.

"Protective feature," she said. "Shielded ops station as a safety protocol during weapons checks. The Superiority is big on safety protocols." She peered at the stopwatch. "Wow. Did you really defeat ten guards and run all the way here in under five minutes?"

I fired again. And again. Just to see if I could bring the shield down. When it didn't work, I sighed. "I only had to beat five guards," I admitted. "I waited for a shift change, and there's a group of them that tends to leave early."

Brade sighed loudly. "You're kidding me. Look, I promise we have *some* competent soldiers. They just don't usually get assigned to guard duty, even on important installations." She sounded like she thought I'd be *offended* by lazy guards.

Then again, I had no idea how to read Brade. She seemed to swap personalities like FM changed shoes. I kept my rifle up.

"You sent me the key," I said. "You let me escape."

"Had to empty the hangar bay too," she said. "Not easy to do, mind you, even during the night watch."

"Why?"

"Have you forgotten our duel?" she asked. "You can lower the gun, Spensa. It doesn't have the juice to punch through the ops station's shield."

The alarms were still blaring. I glanced at the ships. Were they a way out?

"You get to go first," Brade said to me. "Pick a ship. They're unlocked. Head on out, and I'll follow."

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded. “Back on Starsight, you were all too eager to work against me. Now you let me go?”

“We needed you to be our scapegoat then,” Brade said. “Thanks for that, by the way. The footage we took of you being a ‘scary human’ helped Winzik persuade entire planets to overlook his military coup.” She spun a handgun on the desk table, displaying absolutely atrocious muzzle control. “They’re so docile. A lot about the Superiority will need to change if they want to hold on to all they’ve achieved.”

She looked at me, and seemed to sense my hesitance. I hadn’t run for a ship. I didn’t like this; it smelled off.

“They don’t deserve it,” she said to me. “This empire they’ve built. The diones, the tenasi, the varvax? They were just the ones who figured out cytonics first; then they were the first to be able to isolate and control the slugs. They think it’s their grand philosophy that made them dominant, when in reality it was mere luck.”

“I don’t get you, Brade,” I said, stepping closer. “Why do you follow him? Why do you want to duel me? Why do you do anything you do?”

“For kicks,” she said.

I almost believed it. If her simple motivation was to do what seemed fun at the time, that would explain letting me go. It would explain a lot. But there were easier ways to have fun. She had committed to flying with me at Starsight, keeping up her persona even when it was difficult.

Whatever her reasons, this was her game. If I was going to escape, I’d need to play by her rules at first, until I found a way to break them.

“Are you just going to stand there?” she asked. “Soon this place will be swarming with troops. But if you’re out there with me, Winzik will be slower to act. I’ve got a message typed up saying I caught you escaping and am giving chase. He’ll still send others to help, but knowing I’m chasing you should calm him a little. Buy us time for a real fight. Your choice though. Do you want to stand here and be caught?”

I went running for one of the ships, fully aware that I was dancing to her tune. But maybe she would actually fly out and duel me. Maybe she really



did want to know which of us was better. In that case, I had an opportunity to escape. A far better one than I had locked in that cell.

I located a sleek interceptor model I knew had a familiar control scheme and threw myself into the cockpit, still expecting some kind of last-minute trap. Nothing stopped me as I raised the ship up on its acclivity ring, then boosted straight out the bay doors through the shield and into the vacuum of space.

Brade followed moments later in her own ship. Scud, we were really going to do this. I still couldn't hyperjump, with the drugs in my system, but I'd picked a good time to try my escape. I usually got a dose about an hour after shift change, so I figured my powers should start returning shortly.

I had a chance, a real one. I just had to beat Brade, then elude capture for long enough to hyperjump. As Brade dove for me, unloading with her destructors, my instincts kicked in. I still didn't know for sure why she was doing this.

But I knew, sure as the stars themselves, that she was going to regret toying with me.

## 27

I boosted away from Brade on overburn, but focused primarily on defensive flying. I needed the lay of this region before I got serious.

We'd left a newer-looking space station, flat and rectangular with bays along the sides. It looked a little like a...well, a giant space harmonica. The sort our pathleader had played back in my nomadic childhood. My monitors labeled this station "Brez Observation Platform."

My monitor picked out smaller structures in the distance—hundreds of them. Mines, maybe? They did seem to be arrayed in a pattern, creating a large field around the region. There were kilometers between each one, but viewing this as a battlefield, I could see an intentionality to the way they were placed.

In the area closest to me was a lot of space junk, drifting far more haphazardly. The main showpiece, though, was an old space platform—much, much larger than Brez, the station where I'd been captive. The behemoth floated a short distance away, by starship terms.

This was Evensong, my proximity monitor said: an ancient platform that resembled Starsight. It looked mostly derelict, though its surface was encrusted with hundreds, maybe thousands of skyscrapers. No lights came from any of them, but somewhere on that platform would be the hub where all the commslugs were housed.

I punched my ship in that direction to get a closer look, while Brade swept outward. Evensong seemed to have a bubble of air around it like Starsight, but my proximity monitor didn't warn of a shield. Vast swaths of brown ground marked dead gardens. The buildings hadn't corroded—

modern metals resisted that, no matter how long they sat—but I saw broken windows. Streets that seemed to have been stripped of metal for use elsewhere.

A part of me found it incredible. The platforms around Detritus had remained functional for hundreds of years without intervention. What had happened here to make this place so derelict?

“It was a human installation once,” Brade said over my comm.

I hesitated. She hadn’t pressed her attack. I felt an urgency to be on with the contest, before Winzik found out what we were doing. At the same time, if Brade was willing to talk, maybe I could get some information out of her?

“What happened?” I asked, careful not to get complacent, staying out of her direct line of fire. Talking to me could be a ploy to get me to let my guard down.

“War,” she said. “It got annexed by one of the many human factions trying to claim the galaxy. After that group collapsed, it became a pirate hub. Then another group took it, and they fell too. On and off over hundreds of years.”

“Makes sense, I suppose,” I said, flying down around one of the larger skyscrapers. “But why did it fall into disrepair like this? It’s got to be cheaper to fix it up than build another station.”

We flew out over the side of the station, lit by a distant sun that provided some twilight illumination. It left Evensong with deep shadow along one face, pooling like ink. We crested the edge of the station and headed toward the underside of the platform—which was covered in its own buildings, since up and down were matters of choice in a place with artificial gravity.

Here I was met with a daunting sight. Giant creatures, like tube worms each at least a couple of kilometers long, undulating through the vacuum. They’d been sheltered from my sight by the platform, but each of these things was as large as a capital ship. There were dozens of them here, moving slowly through space.

I veered away with a jerk of my ship, and suddenly—now that I knew what to look for—I realized I’d been mistaken earlier. The space junk I’d

seen upon leaving Brez...it included more of these things. Hundreds of them, swimming through the void of space.

“Scud,” I whispered. “What are those?” Space worms existed? Why hadn’t M-Bot told me about them when he’d dashed my hopes of finding sand worms!

“Damn, you’re sheltered,” Brade replied. “You’ve really never seen a vastworm before?”

“No.”

“An infestation like this is dangerous,” Brade said. “They can swallow ships. In a more populated region, the government would dedicate huge resources to exterminating them before they grew into what we have here. But out here...well, Evensong is old, abandoned. Nobody comes here. It’s basically just a blip on interstellar maps, with a warning attached. Jump in here, and you risk getting swallowed.”

Scud! The worm I’d turned away from had noticed me, and it was undulating after us. The thing didn’t seem fast, but it was *huge*. I doubted it could swallow a ship that was aware and alert, but it was still unnerving with that wide circular mouth the size of giant bay doors. Brade, of course, took some shots at me while I was distracted. One hit my shield before I managed to execute some decent dodges.

She chuckled softly, the sound coming in over the line.

“Why?” I demanded. “Why would the Superiority build a central hub here? I expected something as vibrant and populated as Starsight.”

“Yeah, well, that would be on everyone’s maps. Hard to keep quiet. The Superiority is all about making people ignore things that are secretly important.”

That was true. Warships pretended to be merchant vessels. Slugs were labeled as dangerous to ensure people were afraid to pick one up if they saw one. It was an understandable methodology, when you didn’t rule by military might but by the control of information. So, they’d situated their central communications hub in a place nobody would visit.

I found the view intimidating. All those worms out there, like maggots in a stew, floating and moving through space. Serene, yet deadly. Worse, as

I outpaced the worm behind us, I saw another dangerous sight in the near distance: the Superiority fleet that Winzik had been gathering. Three huge carriers, the largest of the capital ships, along with two battleships and a half dozen smaller gunships and destroyers.

That wasn't much in the context of a large-scale galaxy, but it was already a fleet that dwarfed our own. The enemy fleet hung in its own space with a number of dead worms, blown in half, floating nearby. The others seemed to be keeping their distance, as if they could sense where some of their kind had been killed.

"So, are we actually going to do this?" Brade asked. "Or are you going to just continue sightseeing? I have Winzik stalled for now. But that won't last forever."

"Brade—"

"You should know," she added, "that I have a remote control device on your ship to let me take it over. Try to escape, and I'll lock you down. Need proof?" She flipped my overburn on and off.

I gritted my teeth. I *hated* the idea of my ship being controlled by someone else.

"So you can just lock me down?" I snapped. "You've already won, then."

"I won't use it," she said. "Not unless you try to run or are otherwise defeated. No cytonics on my part either. Come on. Destroy me, and you can fly away—but as long as I'm here, you're captive. Ready?"

"Get a little closer, and I'll show you how ready I am."

A protracted fight favored me, giving time for the drugs in my system to run out—so I probably should have been looking for a way to accomplish that. But as Brade approached, firing with twin destructors, I found myself not caring. Here was a *fight*. Despite everything I'd been through, everything I'd learned, I was still a warrior at my core. I *had* to prove that I was better than Brade. The opportunity to get some measure of vengeance on one of my captors was all-consuming.

I dodged away from her weapons fire and soared alongside the ancient platform, passing abandoned rooms with tiny windows and cavernous

docking bays, like eyeholes in a skull. Brade thought she could toy with me? Let me out of my prison to have some fun, then lock me back up when she was done?

She'd see.

When we had flown together at Starsight, I'd sometimes held back so as to not seem *too* skilled; that would have been suspicious. Brade had seen me fly—we'd even faced off—but I figured she would probably still underestimate me.

Evensong's sides didn't have any buildings, just windows and docking bays, so I wove around to the bottom of the station. There I entered an ancient street, diving in among the buildings to see what Brade would do.

And scud, she was too smart to get pulled into such a tight chase. She stayed up above, where she could watch or outrun me. If I flew up and out, she'd have a good line of sight to shoot me down. So I flipped my ship around, nearly overloading the GravCaps—then boosted backward and stopped. Up above, she continued onward for a second, while I darted between buildings to my right. Being down this low might confuse her proximity sensors, making her lose track of me in the mess of ancient steel buildings.

"Not bad," Brade said to me a short time later. "Where did you go?"

"Better watch your tail," I said.

She chuckled. "Do you ever wish it could go back to this? Pilots struggling one-on-one? Rather than sweeping galactic domination and political nonsense?"

I didn't respond. Because I still didn't know how to read Brade. Of course I wanted something like that—but she was playing off my desires.

"What happened to you, Spensa?" she asked me. "In the nowhere? What did you do in there?"

"I learned who I was," I said. "And where I came from."

"You think it could help me? Find the same answers?"

Scud, she sounded sincere. But I'd been played too many times to fall for it. Instead I wove through some streets at a very slow speed, then pulled to a stop near some abandoned hovercars. I had Brade tracked on my

proximity monitor as she flew around up above, trying to see where I'd gone. Sitting still felt wrong—dangerous—but I knew it was the right thing to do. Her sensors would have way more trouble tracking me this way.

The ploy worked. Brade went into a large sweeping pattern, flying “upside down” and using visuals to try to find me. Not a bad move, as my ship *would* stand out to human eyes against all this wreckage. But she started in the wrong location, which gave me the perfect opportunity. As she swung out, I turned my nose upward, put full power to my acclivity ring, and boosted straight up along the side of a skyscraper.

I popped out in a perfect position to fall in on her tail, and though she spotted me mid-maneuver and broke off her search, I still managed to stay on her. She wove and dodged, but I drew inevitably closer and started taking careful shots. Anticipating her dodges, I managed to score two hits on her ship—which should have put her shield at around half power. She'd need to stop flying to reignite it, which you never wanted to do while in combat.

I could hear her grunting through the line as she tried to outfly me. I leaned forward, smiling, enjoying the simple focus of the duel. For the moment, I allowed myself to pretend this was all that mattered. I let myself enjoy the fight as Brade led me out from the shadow of Evensong into open space, flying dangerously close to one of those enormous space worms. The thing undulated in the vacuum, its enormous body rippling as Brade used it for cover, coming in close to its wrinkled pink-orange skin.

I took my thumb off the firing button. Judging by the corpses around the Superiority fleet, these things were susceptible to our weapons, but I couldn't imagine that the small destructors on my ship would do much harm to it. I decided to stick to her and hold off on firing for now, just in case stray shots enraged it or something. She gave me quite the run, soaring in a spiral along the worm's body, moving toward the head—and the thing noticed us as we flew, twisting and looking our direction, though I couldn't make out any sort of eyes on the gargantuan beast.

“What *are* these things?” I asked. “Like, really?”

“Vastworms feed off cytonic energy,” Brade said. “Any place where you collect too many taynix, you’re likely to draw them, unless you do a lot of work to shield the minds.”

Detritus had never drawn any that I knew about. But then, we also had a pretty extensive shielding system. I was about to ask for more info, but Brade—still trying to shake me from her tail—boosted up along the worm’s head. She spun in a perfectly executed Ahlstrom loop.

Then dove straight into the worm’s gaping mouth.

Um...

Maybe *I* was the one who had underestimated *her*.

“Brade?” I said. “Are you *insane*?”

“Maybe,” she replied, the comm fuzzing. “You think you’re better than me? See if you can chase me in here. Remember, until you bring me down, you’re as good as in prison.”

Scud. I took a long deep breath.

Then I followed her in.



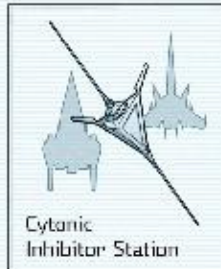


## Superiority Outpost Overview Record DST230310

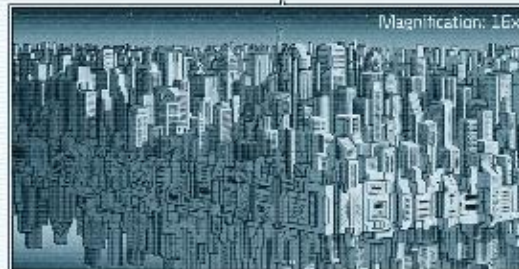
### ◁ ▷ Evensong ▷ ◁

Human Platform (Derelict)

L: 80.5km  
W: 25km  
D: 1.5km



Cytanic  
Inhibitor Station

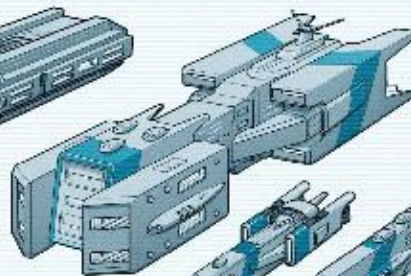


### ◁ ▷ Superiority Fleet Elements ▷ ◁

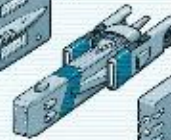
Brac Observation  
Platform



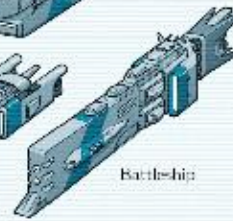
Superiority  
Carrier



Gunship  
Interceptor

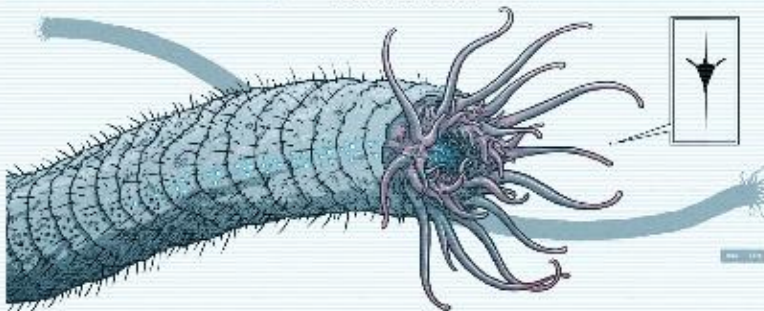


Destroyer



Battleship

### ◁ ▷ Vastworms ▷ ◁



For an expanded summary of this illustration, go to [this page](#).

## 28

**A**s a little girl, I'd always dreamed of flying in space. Of getting off Detritus, of being out *there*. In the realm of stars and suns, of moons and nebulae. If you'd told me I'd make it, but would someday have to fly through the guts of a giant space worm...well, let's be honest about the kind of kid I was. I'd have thought that was awesome.

The reality was more nerve-wracking than I'd have imagined. I had to turn on the ship's floods, illuminating the hollow tube innards of the beast. According to my sensors, it was still a vacuum in here—and the thing had these strange tendrils hanging down from the walls of the guts. Like jellyfish tentacles maybe, only much larger. Waving in the vacuum, reaching toward the center of the passage from all directions. All told, the throat of the thing was twelve meters wide, but those tendrils were three meters long, thick as rope, and left me with alarmingly little space to fly without touching them.

In fact, I clipped one as I tried to keep a bead on Brade's boosters glowing in the darkness beyond. As soon as I touched the tendril my shield went down—a red warning light blinking on my dash. Scud! That tentacle had *drained* the shield. Seemed like cytonic energy wasn't the only thing these worms fed on.

If the tentacle could slurp down a shield, then what would it do if it touched the ship? I decided not to find out, and slowed, weaving through the strange worm guts more carefully. Fortunately, Brade had slowed as well. Maybe I'd gotten lucky and she'd had her own shield drained too.

I watched closely, and saw her get dangerously close to one of the tentacles. Close enough that her shield should have reacted—but it didn't. I put my thumb back on the destructor button, but didn't press it.

"Brade," I said. "I've got you. Yield."

She snickered. "Yield? What is this? An Errol Flynn movie?"

"A what?"

"Old Earth," she said. "Actor."

This was the first time I'd heard her reference anything from Earth popular culture, not merely Earth history. She'd been raised by human parents for part of her youth. Unless that had been a lie. Had they...watched Earth films?

"Brade," I said to her, "I'm on your tail and your shield is down. I can shoot you."

"So why don't you?"

"I..."

"What *really* happened to you in the nowhere?" she asked me. "Why do you make the air vibrate when you feel pain? How did you learn to cut through inhibitors? And why are you suddenly so hesitant to fire on your enemy?"

Scud, was I doing it again? Holding back because I *wanted* her to be something that she wasn't? Or was this a lingering effect of having been among the Broadsiders, of learning to fight worthy opponents without killing?

I wasn't in the nowhere any longer. And last time I'd tried to trust this person, she'd betrayed me.

I pushed the button, sending twin streams of destructor fire straight toward her. Brade chuckled, dodging in a spin, barely evading my shots—which hit some of the tentacles. They absorbed the energy, and suddenly all of the nearby green jellyfish strands started to tremble and whip, making them far, far more difficult to avoid.

I threw my ship into a sequence of dodges, speeding up, despite how dangerous it was. Brade laughed even harder as she increased her speed, and both of us were forced to boost forward, spinning and weaving as

tentacles started trying to grab us. I narrowly avoided a sequence of them before bursting back into open space, out through the worm's butt, which was open like the front.

This was...not the glorious image of a starfighter pilot I'd always imagined for myself.

Sweat running down my face, I broke right, trying to quiet my heart. In the rush, I'd caught up with Brade, and we'd burst out of the worm at the same moment. Now Brade—denying me time to reignite my shield—managed to get me in her sights. She filled the space with destructor fire. I was forced to dive down, spinning, but behind me the worm turned and followed us—moving faster than the other one had. Somehow it picked up enough speed to keep pace with us. Scud, how was that even possible?

I supposed it had seen me as mere space debris before. Now I was prey, and Brade had thoroughly tricked me into alerting it to that fact.

"Shoot another worm," she suggested over the comm. "Make this interesting."

"Shut up," I growled.

She laughed again, but then she did something and the worm suddenly cut off the chase, undulating in the other direction. I frowned, watching on the proximity monitor but not daring to look back. What...?

"Use your IMP," she said. "The blasts hit with a frequency the things don't like."

"Thanks," I said. "I suppose."

Her destructor fire around my ship trailed off. Maybe she was luring me into complacency. But why call off the worm in that case? Scud, I had *no idea* how to read this woman.

"So, do *you* want to yield?" she asked.

"Not a chance."

"Good," she said. "Reignite shields and go another round? Winzik is preparing ships to come after us, but we might have enough time for one more go."

I soared back toward the derelict Evensong. There, I put a building between myself and her and cautiously stopped. I didn't reignite yet, in case

she was waiting for me to be vulnerable and attack.

She didn't. She stopped her own ship in the air and started the process, so I pulled the lever to start my shield ignition as well. It would take around thirty seconds.

"So what is it?" she asked. "That strange distortion around you? The mess you make of inhibitor fields? What *really* happened, Spensa?"

Ah...so that was what this was about. Let me out, duel with me, get me talking. Brade was confused by my new powers.

And she wanted them for herself.

Now that I understood, a lot of things made sense. Was this some calculated plan with Winzik to figure out my secrets?

And scud, how could I use this knowledge against her?

"I don't think I can explain it," I said, testing my theory. Indeed, she didn't come after me as our shields rose. No other ships left Brez, despite Brade's warning. She was here to talk, not duel. This fight was an illusion.

Had I finally figured out one of Brade's traps before she sprang it?

"Can you try?" Brade asked. "I feel...lost sometimes, with my powers. That there's so much to learn, so much to understand—and that I'll never understand myself until I do."

Scud, she was a good actor. There was real emotion behind those words—and I was impressed despite myself. Even knowing what she was doing, it almost worked.

If I was right, then I had no way to escape. She probably had a dozen ships watching, ready to hyperjump in and attack me the moment something went wrong. I couldn't run, but maybe I could stall. Until my powers returned.

So I talked, knowing full well that I was playing a dangerous game. "You'd have to go into the nowhere, Brade," I said. "Completely. Not just with your senses. Step into a portal, and seek something called the Path of Elders."

"You just made that up."

Technically, Chet had made it up. So I was confident I wasn't giving her anything too valuable. "No, I didn't," I said. "I visited special sites around

the belt of the nowhere. They gave me visions of the past, helped me learn, helped me grow into my powers.”

“And the delvers?”

“I brought one with me,” I said. “When I was in there, it approached me. You remember that one at Starsight? The one you summoned, and I drove off?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“It came to me, in a *human form*. It traveled with me. Tried to understand me. Befriended me.”

“Well, that’s creepy.”

I stopped myself from saying more. I was straying too close to the truth.

“Spensa?” she asked.

“It’s difficult to explain, like I said,” I told her. *Just keep talking*. “I leaped through that portal on Starsight, and didn’t know what to expect. I ended up in a jungle, and—”

“The delver,” Brade interrupted. “The one that traveled with you. Scud...*that’s* what I felt. It melded with you somehow, didn’t it? *That’s* how you cut through inhibitor fields. *That’s* what’s going on. You’ve captured one? Or made a treaty with it?”

Scud. I didn’t answer.

“Hell,” Brade said. “And *that’s* why they’re afraid of you, isn’t it? Something to do with that bond. I *knew* I felt something familiar about you.”

“I understand them,” I said to her. “In a way no person ever has before, Brade. You’re not going to be able to control them. I can promise you that. You’re mistaken if you think you can. Help me escape. Together we could *really* figure out the delvers, and maybe make the galaxy safe from them *forever*.”

“Huh,” Brade said. “Yeah, not interested. All right, guys. That’s probably all we’ll get today. Come on in.”

I jumped despite myself as two dozen starfighters appeared around me in a tight formation. I boosted away immediately, but Brade just hit the kill

switch on my ship, shutting down the boosters. One of the other ships flew after me and grabbed my ship with a light-lance tow cable.

I felt like an idiot. This time I'd anticipated her, even managed to figure out her ploy. But still she beat me. I pounded my controls as Brade edged her ship up to mine.

"Technically, I *didn't* use my powers against you," she noted. "So, if it matters, I kept my word."

"You killed my ship in space!" I shouted at her.

"I saved you," she said. "From being annihilated by all the other ships that arrived to destroy you. You took too long, Spensa. I warned you that if you did, the fight would be joined by others."

I leaned back in my seat, frustrated.

"Did you *really* think that we'd just be able to come out here and duel?" she asked, sounding amused. "If this wasn't a setup, the two of us would have been swarmed moments after leaving the station."

"What now, boss?" someone said over the line.

"Now we haul her back and toss her in the cell," Brade said. "And *I* figure out how to bond with a delver, like she has."

I seethed. "I'm going to kill you, Brade," I whispered into the comm. "Someday I'm going to stand above you with a sword at your neck, and you're going to beg, and—"

She chuckled, then the light on my comm flashed off, indicating she'd cut the line. I pounded the controls again, growling. But the ship wasn't to blame for any of this. I was. Me and my foolishness.

Why was I so willing to be caught by her? Why did I play into her games? Even still, a part of me wanted so badly to befriend her. Why?

*Because, I thought, she's the one who escaped you.* Every other person I'd flown with—from Skyward Flight to the Broadsiders—had eventually come to my side. Hesho had become my copilot. Peg had come to respect me. Morriumur had saved my life. Jorgen had become my scudding *boyfriend*.

Brade was the exception. The only flightmate who had turned against me. A part of me smarted with pain at that, in a way that few other pains



could rival. Beyond that, I saw something in her that I wanted to save. A representation of what humans had suffered at the hands of the Superiority. I wanted so desperately to make up for that, to protect her, to show her that life could be better.

However, she didn't need or want rescuing. I had to remind myself of that time and time again. But at least, I thought as I calmed myself, she hadn't learned anything of actual value. She'd never be able to bond a delver as I had, because that required empathy she didn't have.

We hyperjumped back to the hangar as a group and settled down on the dock. I immediately tried to pop my canopy and run—but they'd remotely locked it up tight.

I had one sole hope remaining. That as she'd been playing me, I'd been able to play her a little. Because I *had* wasted time with our conversation. We were close to my next dose—actually, I thought we were past it. I pushed at the boundaries of my awareness and felt hints of my powers returning.

*Here...Chet said inside me. I'm...here...*

I still had a chance, but I couldn't let them stun me. So, as Brade's team came to my ship, I raised my hands and bowed my head, eyes closed. I tried to project a nonthreatening air.

Her team popped the canopy of my ship. These weren't the same guards that shot me each day. These were fighter pilots—they seemed to mostly be tenasi, like Peg. They assumed that holding me at gunpoint was good enough.

"You grow *muluns*," one of them said. "I respect that. Out of the ship."

I obeyed, and didn't give them any reason to fire on me. I slowly climbed down the ladder they placed, then raised my hands again, trying to look tired as Brade walked over, helmet under her arm.

"Thanks," she said, "for the intel."

I shrugged, my head bowed.

"Tell you what," she said to me. "Maybe once I figure out how to do what you've done, *then* we can plan about what to do about the delvers? Together."

I just growled in response, trying not to seem *too* docile. But then as she turned away, I let my shoulders slump. She had won this little contest of wits. Even if I'd figured her out, she'd gotten what she'd wanted. That *had* to make her feel good, right? Like her plan had turned out perfectly?

Nearby, a varvax doctor was waiting with my twice-daily dose. She trotted over, and I tried an emergency hyperjump. Nothing happened. I felt *so close* to being able to escape this bind, but that was still a few minutes off. It was agonizing to realize my chance was going to slip away. The doctor took my arm, but at that moment the universe finally threw me a scudding bone. Because the doors to the hangar opened, surprising Brade, who spun.

Winzik, with a complement of guards, strode in. "What have you been *doing*, Brade!" he demanded. "I didn't authorize this!"

Everybody in the room froze, including the doctor. If Brade hadn't cleared her stunt with the man in charge, that meant that she *hadn't* been talking to him earlier, when she'd claimed she was.

I still had a chance. I just had to stall a little longer.

"Oh no!" I said. "He's found us out, Brade! Quick! What do we do?"

## 29

**B**rade stared at me, her eyes bulging.

Awesome.

“Run, Brade!” I shouted to her. “He knows we’ve been working together!”

“Shut her up!” Brade snapped, and one of her tenasi grabbed me and shoved a gag toward my mouth.

Winzik stepped forward. “No, no,” he said, waving his hands. “Leave her alone; I will hear her. Human, you’ve been working with Brade, have you?”

The tenasi pilots reluctantly backed away. Most importantly, the doctor joined them.

“Yes,” I said, trying to sound reluctant. “Ever since Starsight. We thought maybe...maybe we could make you free the humans in the preserves. Find a way we could be warriors again, serving you.”

Was that too obvious a lie? I couldn’t tell if Winzik was buying it or not. His crab face wasn’t exactly capable of the expressions I found common. I did think the way he waved his arms next was a sign of agitation though.

“My, my,” he said.

“She’s lying, Winzik,” Brade said, rolling her eyes. “Very clearly.”

“Yes, perhaps she is,” Winzik said, turning to Brade. “Perhaps. But what is it I have found you doing? The soldiers in these docks reassigned? A crack team of pilots commandeered? You went and had your little duel with her, didn’t you? The one I *expressly* told you was foolish?”

“I needed to know which of us was better,” Brade said.

“You grow unruly,” Winzik said, tapping his exosuit’s hands together. “You no longer give me the deference you once did. You think that because you are cytonic, I need you.”

“I—”

“You do not speak now,” Winzik said. “You will be confined to quarters.”

Brade deflated visibly. Fine. Now, so long as that doctor stayed away...I could *feel* my powers seeping back. I was so *close*. Chet was growing increasingly clear, his soul vibrating with mine. I strained and felt something in the distance. A familiar mind. M-Bot? He seemed to perk up, and I felt his excitement at sensing me. But I couldn’t get any words through. I tried to send him panic, a feeling that I was captured.

I got the slightest impression of something in return. An acknowledgment. And a sense of something powerful.

Defiance.

*Just a few more minutes!* I kept my own head bowed, barely daring to look up to watch.

“Confined to quarters?” Brade said. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“Now, I think this entire fiasco needs to change direction,” Winzik said. “My, my. I should not have listened to your aggressive instincts, Brade. We leave our worlds undefended by gathering this force of ships as you have suggested.”

Brade looked up sharply.

“We should be waiting out the humans, not preparing to confront them,” Winzik continued. “I have control of the entire Superiority, and all of its strength. We will disperse this fleet and send the ships back to maintain control on the most important planets. Then we will wait for the humans to starve themselves. Yes. Yes, this is the proper way.”

“Winzik,” Brade said, “don’t ruin—”

“Ah, but you don’t speak right now,” he chided her. “Remember? You are too like these other humans. They are of lesser intelligence, as are you. I see that they will chew themselves up, just as you have been unable to resist fighting this human. We can let them be, in turmoil, *then* clean up the mess

and document it, so that all will see that I have defeated them. Yes. Let us begin.”

He turned and started toward the door. Brade let out a long, annoyed sigh. Then she raised her sidearm pistol and blasted a hole in Winzik’s head.

Shocked, I watched his exosuit fall to the ground with a calamitous *crash*. I stared, then looked up, expecting the soldiers in the room to immediately attack Brade.

No one moved. Even the other varvax aides who had entered with Winzik just waved their hands in faint agitation.

“Well, that’s over,” Brade said, sliding her gun back into her holster. “What are the latest reports on Detritus’s troop movements?”

A varvax hurried over, holding up a datapad for Brade. “Continued consolidation from the planets Evershore and ReDawn, sir. They’re building up their own fleet.”

“And our troops?” she asked.

“Winzik’s orders have produced...lethargic responses,” the aide admitted. “It could—should—be going much more quickly.”

Brade sighed. “Probably should have shot him sooner.”

“Perhaps, sir,” the varvax admitted.

“Wait,” I said—my utter confusion breaking through my good sense. “Wait. You’re just going to let her *get away with shooting your leader*?”

The reptilian tenasi next to me chuckled. “What?” he asked. “You think we would band together behind *that*?” He gestured to Winzik’s fallen husk. Horrifyingly, I realized that the crab-thing inside the helmet wasn’t dead.

The liquid was leaking from the shattered faceplate all over the floor, and the much smaller creature that was Winzik was crawling out of its remnants, moving in jerks. His crustacean mouth gasped for breath. He was...suffocating in the air.

“A bureaucrat?” another of the soldiers asked. “You really think a *bureaucrat* orchestrated the conquest of the entire Superiority? We weren’t going to follow a leader who couldn’t tell a flanking maneuver from a feint.”

“We needed a *military* leader,” one of the varvax aides said.

“We needed,” the tenasi next to me growled, “a *human*.”

Stars and Saints above. Everyone in this room had...had been working behind the scenes with Brade for years. Each of them knowing, all along, that Winzik was a puppet. I looked back to Brade, who was going over battle reports and quietly giving orders. Scud, *this* was the real Brade, wasn't it? All this time, all these false faces, and *this* was who she was.

A conqueror. Hiding in plain sight among her enemies. Despite everything, I couldn't help but be impressed.

“Give the order to gather our forces,” she said to the aide. “Quickly this time. Inform the command staff that I've finally executed our contingency. I suspect a lot of them will be happy to hear it.”

“Yes, sir,” the aide said, tucking away his datapad. “We'll need to start the propaganda machine immediately. The planets could accept Winzik as their war minister, but a human is going to be more difficult to spin.”

“I'll wear the hologram in public until you manage the situation,” Brade said, waving them off. As the aides left, she strolled over to a workstation and picked up a large crowbar that she—to my surprise—absently handed to me.

I took it, feeling the heavy weight of the steel in my hands.

“For him,” she said, nodding to where Winzik was crawling across the floor.

He was trailing what I guessed was blood from several sections of his carapace. It looked like he had been connected to the exosuit biologically. I'd never known if those things were entirely tech or natural growths. I thought maybe they were something in between.

“The final blow belongs to you, Spensa,” Brade said. “For what his people did to yours. An honor I give you, one soldier to another.”

He was slowly making for the door. Probably deranged by the lack of liquid to breathe, and bleeding out. I gripped the crowbar, then hesitated.

“You're just going to record this,” I realized. “And as soon as you need an excuse for why you're in charge, you'll plaster the video all over the news, showing me—a human assassin—killing Winzik.”

“Damn,” Brade said. “For once you figured it out.” She slapped her arm, and an illusion snapped into place around her—like the one I’d worn to imitate Alanik. They’d stolen that tech from M-Bot.

The illusion made her look like me.

“Fortunately,” she said, “few know about this tech. Modern holovideos have encrypted metadata to prevent tampering—but it’s perfectly easy to fool them if they’re genuinely recording what they see.”

I had no idea what some of those words meant, but as a guard handed Brade another crowbar, I stepped forward. I figured I could milk this for a few minutes of extra time...but as I saw Winzik suffering, I actually felt a little sorry for him. Despite it all. So, I slammed my crowbar down on Winzik’s carapace, crushing the life out of him.

With that, I finally ended the tyrant who had kept my people imprisoned for years, who had gotten my father killed, who was responsible for so much death. At least a member of the DDF had delivered the final blow, instead of Brade in a disguise.

I felt...unfulfilled. Not because I felt bad killing him. It had been a mercy, and he certainly deserved an execution if only for the death of poor Comfort earlier. Winzik had been a thoroughly evil creature.

But I couldn’t pin the suffering of my people entirely on him. The oppression was systemic in the Superiority, not the result of one person’s schemes. I’d gotten vengeance on one little part of the machine that had ruined my people’s lives, but this wasn’t the solution. The solution had to be much, much bigger than one girl with a crowbar.

“What now?” I asked Brade, looking up from the dead Winzik.

“Now,” she said, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to crush your rebellion. Nothing personal. Can’t have a rival faction of humans challenging me for control. Our military is proud to have a human at their head, but an entire fleet of them would be problematic.”

“We could work together,” I said, stepping toward her. “You don’t *have* to do this.”

“Of course I don’t,” Brade said, frowning. “Spensa, do you have *any* idea how long I’ve been working toward this? I’ve been planning it ever

since they took me from my family. Putting things in place. Positioning myself.

“The Superiority is an *enormous* mess. The military understands how tenuous it all is. We lack the strength to control what we have, and need to rule through access to hyperslugs. Yet one slipup, and the secrets of hyperdrives would spread through the entire galaxy. The Superiority is a stone balanced on a single point, and it’s *going* to fall.

“We had to take action, and they needed a leader who understands aggression on a level that hasn’t been forcibly bred out of her.” She waved to herself. “I’m poised to rule everything, and your people could upset all of that.”

“*Our* people.”

“What, because we’re the same race, we should work together?” She smiled. “Have you *read* any human history, Spensa? We *never* got along. That’s part of what differentiates us from some of the other species. They had world governments early—achieved through excluding those who didn’t agree, yes, but they unified. We’re simply not good at that.”

“So it all just continues,” I said, mostly to keep her talking at this point, “the way it has been?”

“Spensa, I *created* this situation,” Brade said. “And by crushing your rebellion, I’m going to prove that the military was right to support me. Sorry. But I *have* read human history. I’ve studied it, learned from the master tacticians of the past. I...”

She frowned, then put her hand on a pouch she wore on her belt. She was looking past me, toward...

Well, scud. Toward the doctor still standing back there with my dose. My powers fluttered and stuttered, like a person trying to come awake in the morning. I could *almost* access them. I strained, and felt the delver inside me churning. The air started to warp around me, which made me curse softly.

It would give me away. *Can’t you stop that?* I thought in anger at the delver.



*No*, the thought came back from Chet. *No. I...I need you. Can you control it?*

Could I?

“Hell,” Brade said. “Did we give her the full dose?”

“No dose at all,” the doctor said. “We were ordered not to touch her—”

“Give it now!” Brade said, scrambling forward and waving toward the troops. Several of them grabbed me by the arms, and one pulled the crowbar from my hands. The doctor hurried up, preparing the syringe. But before she reached me, klaxons started going off throughout the station. Along with red lights, flashing with a panicked urgency.

“What?” Brade asked.

“Major incursion into the local space,” one of the tenasi soldiers said, reading from an alert monitor on the wall. “An entire *planet* has hyperjumped into the region...” She trailed off, then looked toward us. “It’s Detritus.”

## 30

**M**y soul vibrated even further. My friends.

My friends were here.

And they were doomed.

I wasn't certain why that feeling struck me, but it suddenly seemed overpoweringly potent. I trembled, thinking of the battle to come—and the losses it would inevitably involve.

I gasped, barely noticing as someone grabbed me by the arm.

“Where is the nearest potential command station?” Brade shouted, audible through my haze of pain.

“Meeting rooms across the hall have access!” a soldier replied, pushing open the door out of the docks. “Take your pick.”

“Whichever one is closest,” Brade said. “Get command protocols transferred there, Gavrich. Kio, inform the fleet.” She spun, shaking me by the arm. She pointed at the doctor. “You. Get her doped.”

*My friends are here, Chet thought to me. I need to help them. I need my powers!*

Wait.

They were *my* friends. Not his.

*Our friends. My friends.* He thought the words with force, and the air warped further. *We have to help them!*

“Should we throw her back into her cell?” one of the soldiers asked, slamming me painfully down on the ground as the doctor stepped up.

“No,” Brade said, backing away, watching that doctor through oddly wary eyes. “We might need the delvers, so I’ll want her handy. Just make

sure she's gagged, restrained, and *drugged*."

*We can't get drugged again*, I thought in an utter panic. *Not again. Not again!*

*Do something.*

*Do something.*

*Do something!*

A needle bit my skin. The injection.

I ripped free of my body.

It happened in a blinding moment of pain and confusion. The delver I'd become, the delver that was part of my soul, *ejected*. Not just Chet, but me too—as both of us were intertwined. We launched free exactly like a pilot from a falling ship.

I watched as the doctor dosed my body, which went limp. I was scudding *outside of myself*.

Hell. I was a ghost.

"What have we done?" I asked, and noticed—with a chill—that my body on the floor mouthed the words, its eyes open and staring sightlessly.

*I don't know*, Chet said, vibrating from within my soul where we'd mixed. *I...*

I looked down. I...we...had a kind of shape. I was a glowing golden-white form, with another beside me—overlapping me. Chet, the delver, like my double.

The warping of the air, the random uses of my powers...Was this where it had been leading? Had my soul been trying to escape all this time? I managed, with effort, to control some of my panic.

Even without Chet, I had a soul like a delver's—that was what cytonics were. People who had been mutated over time by radiation coming from the nowhere. We were people who had...whatever quality it was that let an AI exist without circuitry. I wasn't dead. Like M-Bot and the delvers, I could merely exist outside of a physical housing.

Kind of. I *could* still feel my body as I lay there. I could hear, as if with my own ears. I wasn't completely detached from my body, just partially.

Brade eyed my crumpled form on the ground, her hand on the pouch at her side, watching the doctor pull the syringe from my neck. She seemed afraid, legitimately. And why not? That syringe could remove a cytonic's abilities; she was right to be wary of it.

"Done," the doctor said, sounding relieved. "She'll be without her powers for another two spans."

"Finally," Brade said. "Come on."

Two guards grabbed me under the arms, and again I could feel it. When I turned my cytonic body to look at Chet at my side, my physical form twitched in that direction. I wasn't certain I could move it more than that. I followed—hovering, rather than walking—as they relocated to a room across the hall. A holographic battle map sprang up in the center of the room, displaying the large platform of Evensong, the much smaller observation platform we were on, and that sea of mines I'd seen earlier.

I leaned forward and noticed that I could make out something about those mines. Each had a number above it, along with the readings of... vitals?

*Not mines, I realized. It's a huge web of inhibitor stations. Each with a slug, to keep this region protected from unauthorized hyperjumps.*

Indeed, Detritus—marked in holographic blue and hovering even larger than Evensong—had appeared far beyond the edge of this field of inhibitors. It was too distant to blast the stations directly. We'd learned that slugs working together had a multiplicative effect on their powers—so this number of them could cast an enormous bubble, large even on a planetary scale. There would be no chance for Detritus to blow up the inhibitors from the perimeter, at least not without sending in missiles that could easily be shot down in transit.

That was basically all I could pick out of the situation—save for the blips that I guessed were those space worms. Nearby, the guards pulled my body over to the wall and handcuffed me in place to a railing.

"Good, great," Brade said. "Watch her. Even in chains, she'll try to escape."

“She seems really limp,” one of the guards said. “And her eyes are unfocused. Did that drug do something worse to her than usual?”

“She’s faking,” Brade said. “Trying to get us to think she’s insensate. Keep a gun on her.”

“Should we stun her?” the guard asked.

Brade regarded me. Personally, I didn’t mind either way. I doubted it would do anything to my soul.

“Keep close watch,” Brade said. “But no stunning. I might need her able to talk; she’s a bargaining chip in more ways than one.”

As a soul, I glanced again at Chet. He quivered with concern for my friends, and for us. Scud. What...what had we just done? Was there any way to get back into my body? I tried using my powers, and while my mind expanded, I couldn’t hyperjump anything. So I couldn’t say if I was in a better or worse situation than before.

*This is bad*, Chet thought at me. *Isn’t it?* He was looking at the battlefield, and the viewscreen.

*Too early to tell*, I thought, though that latent fear lurked inside of me. The worry that this was the end, the final confrontation. Either we defeated Brade’s forces now, seizing her slugs here and permanently hamstringing her ability to rule...

Or we fell.

A set of holographic heads appeared at the perimeter of the central hologram. Mostly diones, but some tenasi, a couple of avian heklo, one varvax.

“Captains,” Brade said to the people arrayed before her, “I have instituted our contingency plan and have formally taken control of our military, following the disposal of our puppet. He was about to undermine our military operations, and I couldn’t allow him to continue.”

“Good riddance,” said one of the diones. “What are your orders, sir? I think we’ve been invaded.”

*Ah*, I thought. *These are the captains of the fleet she has assembled here, beyond Evensong.*

“It’s not the ideal moment,” Brade said, “as Winzik’s slow gathering of our forces this past week means we’re without immediate reinforcements. I’ve sent orders, and hope to have access to more ships soon. Still, our fleet is much, *much* larger than theirs. We should be able to win this. Just don’t get close to that battle station planet. They have long-range anti-ship cannons, not to mention a shield network that can withstand bombardment.”

“Understood,” one of the captains said. “So we make them come to us?”

“The victor of a battlefield,” Brade responded, “is often the one who can best use the terrain to her advantage. They’re going to have to send in fighters to try to bring down our inhibitor stations—which gives us the advantage. Follow my directions. I’ll show you what a human tactician can do, as long promised.”

The group of them gave affirmatives as some flustered aides hurried into the room, setting up to help Brade run the battlefield. I circled her, and she didn’t seem to be able to see me—so I scoped out the battlefield hologram.

Brade was right. Her side had a far superior position *and* a much larger fighting force. We might be able to match them for starfighters, but they had all those gunships, carriers, and battleships. A true fleet.

Chet quivered further. But, I told him forcibly, we had our own advantage. Primarily, we had Detritus, which was enormous and highly defended, with awesome firepower. Brade was right; my friends were going to have to fly in to bring down the inhibitor stations one at a time. Destroy enough of them, and it would let Detritus approach.

It was a path to victory. If Detritus could draw close enough to Evensong to bombard it, we’d be able to...well, we’d be able to destroy all the enemy slugs. My stomach churned at that thought. I wasn’t certain Jorgen would authorize so much death, but Brade didn’t know that.

If Detritus could get close, the Superiority would have essentially lost the battle.

*Impossible*, Chet thought. *It’s too difficult.*

He had a point. This was a tenuous path to victory for my side. I’d advocated for our forces to come here, but now I saw how dangerous the

assault would be. My friends would have to fly *inside* an enemy inhibitor field. Brade's forces would have cytonic capabilities, and we would not. No jumping away if our ships got hit. I doubted many of the enemy starfighters would have hyperslugs—those were normally reserved for larger ships. But still, we'd be at a huge disadvantage.

*There is a way out*, Chet thought to me.

*What?* I asked, eager for anything that could help our side win.

Instead, he showed me something. The nowhere. With a wave of his arm, it seemed to be there, a tunnel into oblivion. A place where no time passed. In there, he and I could infinitely delay the arrival of the battle. We would never have to watch our friends die, because death—and time, place, and self—would stop existing.

It was seductive. A part of me was horrified I would view it that way—particularly after how far I'd come, and everything I'd done. Another part was mesmerized. I'd spent so long learning about the delvers, and I'd thought I understood what they'd been through.

But in that moment, I could *feel* it. The desire to escape and run away with Chet. It was like what I'd felt when living with the Broadsiders, but magnified a hundredfold. Because I knew, the moment I took this step, everything would stop mattering. There would be no guilt, because guilt simply wouldn't exist.

Step through there, and I'd never feel pain again. Just the joy of being part of something that was perfect and unchanging.

They were in there too. The other delvers. Watching. Lurking. Waiting. If I joined them, would they leave my people alone? Was that the sacrifice I needed to make?

*Spensa?* M-Bot's voice said in my mind. That brought me back to awareness in a heartbeat, and Chet's tunnel to the nowhere collapsed. *Spensa, are you there?*

*M-Bot?* I sent him. And my voice had two tones to it. Mine and Chet's. *M-Bot, yes. I'm here, at Evensong.*

*Thank Turing!* M-Bot said. *Spensa, I managed to talk to Jorgen! And he talked back! I'm learning so much, growing so much. He was already*

*planning to attack Evensong per your plan. When I told him I'd sensed you, he moved up the attack. Everyone is here! We've come to save you.*

It was a rescue operation. They'd brought the entire scudding planet...to get me.

Scud. Chet trembled even more.

*M-Bot, I sent to him, I'm worried about the delvers. Brade is keeping them in reserve, but she thinks she can mobilize them to join this battle if needed. We have to do something about that.*

*I...M-Bot said. I still don't know how to use their weakness against them, Spensa. I've been focused on learning to use my powers, to talk to Jorgen and you.*

*We don't have much time, I said to him. We have to be ready, you and I, to stop them if they join the battle.*

"The enemy has sent a communications request, sir," one of the varvax aides said to Brade in the somewhere. "And...something's changing about the battle station planet."

I turned toward the hologram, where Detritus began to transform—the platforms that protected the planet pulling back to make a hole leading toward the surface. Something flew out through that hole, small by comparison to the planet, but large on the scale of ships. A long, wicked-looking ship with sleek fins. A carrier?

We had a flagship now?

*The shipyards that Rig was working on, I thought. He said he'd found a partially finished project in them...*

The viewscreen changed to a shot of the imposing ship emerging from within Detritus's ring of protections. A brilliant, wonderful sight—a carrier ship with bays for fighters, aglow with flashing lights. Emblazoned along the side, in enormous white letters—written in English—was a single word.

*Defiant.* The name of the ship that had carried us to Detritus all those years ago.

Another visual winked into existence: a shot of the *Defiant's* bridge as Brade accepted the communication. There, seated in a captain's chair, was



an old woman wearing a crisp white uniform. Milky-white eyes. A small figure, yet somehow still strong. Gran-Gran?

She stood up, holding on to the armrests of the chair. “Superiority forces,” she said in a firm voice, “I am Captain Rebecca Nightshade of the starship *Defiant*. Eighty years ago, you drew *my* people into *your* war. You obliterated the ship we called home, stole our heritage, and tried to annihilate us.

“As the last living member of the original *Defiant*’s crew, I’ve been granted my rightful commission as commander of this new vessel. I am of Clan Motorskaps, the people of the engines. You picked a fight with us that we did not want, but then you foolishly failed to exterminate us. And so, we are back. *I* am back. The blood of my ancestors demands that I seek vengeance upon you.

“This is your only warning. Return to us the captives you’ve taken. Turn away from your path of tyranny. Or I *will* see each and every ship that raises arms against us *burned to slag*, and your ashes will be abandoned to drift in the eternal expanse of darkness. Forever frozen, without home or memorial, lamented by your kin, never again to hear the voices or feel the touch of those you have loved. I swear it by the stars, the Saints, and the souls of a thousand warriors who have come before me. I will *have your blood*.”

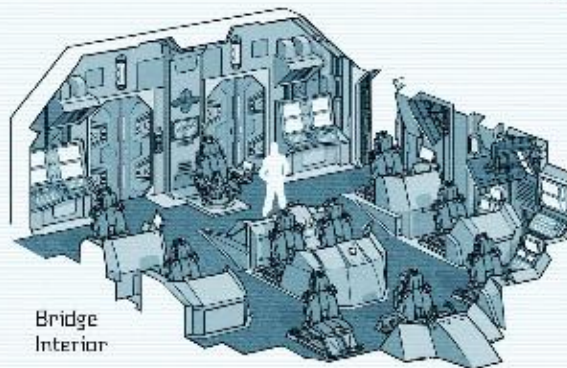
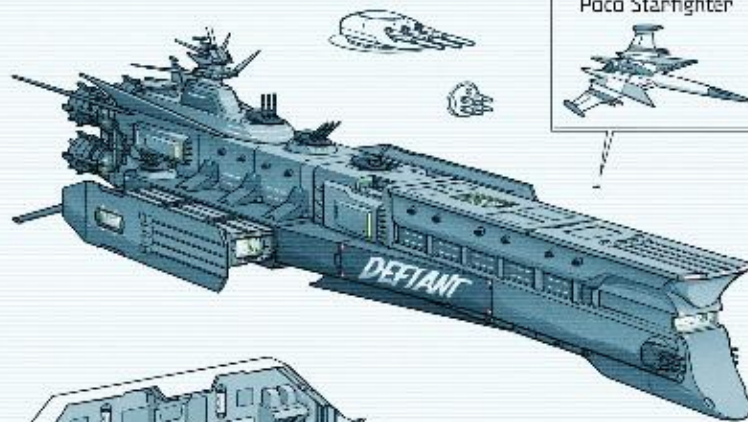
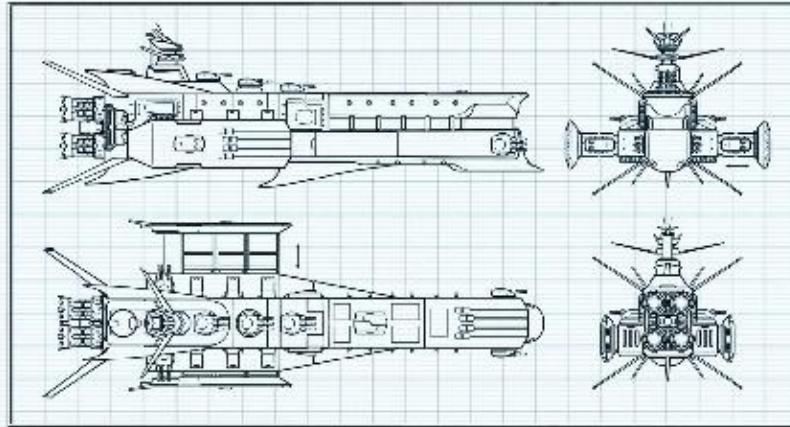
The room fell still, the Superiority soldiers and aides all staring at her, slack-jawed.

“Oh, Gran-Gran,” I whispered. “That was *beautiful*.”



## DDF Phoenix-Class Battlecarrier Record DST230308

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For an expanded summary of this illustration, go to [this page](#).

# 31

## M-BOT

**M**ushroom-Bot felt Spensa's joy at seeing Gran-Gran. If he'd been capable of it, he'd have smiled.

However, he couldn't spare much thought for that battlefield. He had a job to do: he needed to learn how to defeat the delvers. So, he turned his attention back to the nowhere—a place that Spensa had always described as black, or white, or with other stark images.

To him it wasn't a sight, but a different kind of sensation. A place that was a *feeling*, a frozen moment, where all computation could happen at its leisure. He brought his mind here, and set out on his mission. Find the secret. Save the galaxy.

No pressure.

He moved among the delvers, nudging their minds with his, careful to project the right ideas—ones he'd learned from them. Camouflage, essentially. The same thoughts they'd always been thinking, the frozen moment. It worked—and honestly, being a ghost was a lot less frightening than Mushroom-Bot had assumed it would be. Humans acted like dying was this super extremely terrible event. He had instead found it quite liberating.

Still, he *did* miss his body. And things like time, and space, and existence. He maintained a connection to places—the somewhere—that the

rest of the delvers didn't. His perceptions were still those of a being living in linear space—because his heart was there. With his friends.

For now though, he needed to solve the riddle. He had to find a way to expose the delvers' raw pain, then freeze them with *that* instead of this blank sense of comfort. The one they projected to each other with an almost forceful denial.

He got this same affirmation from each of them.

*All is well. All is peaceful.*

Lies. If they would let time pass, they'd recognize it. But the delvers were frozen in that moment of self-delusion. Their memories covered over. Falsely content.

*All is well. All is peaceful.*

He repeated it back to them, pretending to be just another delver. He knew it was a lie though, because the moment they touched the somewhere, the pain started again. They couldn't hide from it when time passed.

Not a one recognized him. He'd been created, he now thought, by the figments—a group of secretive beings who slid through the Superiority and hid among their ranks. Spensa had flown with one at Starsight. Pieces of his code hinted at their hand in his origins.

Regardless, he had been designed for stealth, and so he had the skill to fool these others. The delvers didn't know him for himself. He was just another clone. A deadly spores-death mushroom among the innocuous, identical lemiotod mushrooms. An unnoticed, incorrect homophone in the middle of a spoken sentence. A single line of commented-out code insulting the user.

The longer he spent here, the better he understood the delvers. One tidbit occurred to him: they claimed to never change, but that too was a lie. At one point, they had not known who Brade, Winzik, or Spensa were. Now they did. That was a change. Each time the somewhere leaked in, things changed. Slowly—not by much—but they *did* change.

Each time something changed, even in the slightest, they spread it among themselves. Like a virus. Making certain each repeated the same thing, changed in the same way. That was how they could keep pretending.

So he decided to try something. Brade called in, warning them: *I might need you soon*. Soon didn't matter much to them, but it did to Brade. The delvers began processing this, spreading the idea. Bumping into one another, reinforcing it. A concept.

*She will call. We will answer.*

*She will call. We will answer.*

*She will call. We will answer. What if she betrays us.*

M-Bot added that last one, sending it moving through them. Infecting them. Until it was repeated back to him, like an echo, the delvers desperately adopting this phrase and concept instead of the other—so that they could all remain the same.

It worked.

## JORGEN

Jorgen Weight stood in the battle command station of Platform Prime, well within Detritus's defensive shell, accompanied by his command staff. He didn't want to be here with them. He wanted to be on the flight deck of the newly commissioned *Defiant*, ready to lead a squadron of starfighters in the most important battle of their lives.

Instead, he stood tall before the holographic battle map, hands clasped behind his back. He could acknowledge his yearnings, but he also knew where he was needed.

*If you can see this from among the Saints, I hope you're proud,* he thought to his departed parents.

"Captain Nightshade," he said, bringing Gran-Gran up on a side monitor. "You have authorization to move forward and engage. Be warned, we'll soon have to speak via radio communications and not cytonics, and there's a much greater chance that the enemy will be able to listen in on us."

"Understood and thanks," she said. "If you're listening in, you bastards, I hope you've bidden your families farewell. If not, I'll try to record your screams as you die. For posterity."

He grinned despite himself. Becca Nightshade hadn't been raised in the military establishment, and didn't speak like most officers. But he was

accustomed to Nightshade ways.

The holographic projector was a large disc in the floor of the room, making a 3-D battle map hover in the air above it. As he leaned forward to inspect it, a kitsen platform hovered up on either side of him. Juno, his mentor in meditation, always seemed to be around these days. The little kitsen monk was snacking on a pudding.

Itchika, kitsen supreme tactician, hovered on his right. She had a whole collection of generals and admirals at the table to the side, conferring and making plans.

“And thus we commit,” she said softly. The white-muzzled kitsen wore a modern military uniform instead of the more formal, ancient outfits that some preferred. No medals. Not a single sign of her rank. Just a clean blue uniform and a military cap under her arm. “We just barely got the shadow-walkers back, and now we risk them all.”

“It’s the only way,” Jorgen said.

“I didn’t say I regretted the move,” she replied. “Merely that I...worry about our potential losses.”

Jorgen’s forces couldn’t fly into a large-scale battle like this without their own cytonic inhibitors. The kitsen had warned of terrible tactics used in the old days, such as teleporting explosives directly into a pilot’s cockpit. The Superiority hadn’t used those kinds of extreme measures yet; likely because they relied on slugs. Still, he could imagine them strapping a bomb to a taynix and forcing it to hyperjump next to one of his friends...

They didn’t have enough inhibitor slugs to outfit every ship, but the kitsen cytonics had stepped forward. Despite still being weakened by their long imprisonment, they’d been certain they could do this. And so, each starfighter had its own small inhibition field. That would limit the enemy’s ability to take advantage of the terrain.

It also increased the stakes of this battle. They weren’t just risking their ships; they were risking the bulk of their cytonics.

“It *is* the only way,” Cobb said, stepping up to the hologram opposite Jorgen and the kitsen. He was joined by Rinakin, the UrDail leader. Though



Rinakin wasn't much of a tactician, he'd been invited out of respect, and he seemed to understand that.

"We should have attacked earlier," Jorgen said. "Spensa was right. Waiting only let them gather more resources."

"Perhaps, perhaps," Itchika said, rubbing her chin. "It is never wise to rush into a fight. Giving the enemy time to gather their troops is regrettable, but it allowed us to gather our wits."

The battle map showed the *Defiant*, alone as it flew into enemy space. Enemy capital ships—*three* carriers and two battleships, with six destroyers—hyperjumped in to form a blockade just out of range of Detritus's cannons. The carriers released a swarm of smaller ships, preparing to engage.

"One against five," Jorgen said softly. "The kitsen cruisers can maybe balance out those destroyers, Itchika, but we're severely outnumbered. Can we win this?"

"That depends on how good your pilots are," Itchika said, "and whether or not your shadow-walker battlechief can be rescued to turn the tide."

That meant Spensa. Itchika and the others had seen the recordings of what she'd accomplished during the data storage facility strike. They had an almost mythical belief in her ability to win this battle, one that Jorgen hadn't dissuaded them of. He believed it a little himself.

"We're putting a lot of stock in one single person," Rinakin said, "who abandoned us to engage in a duel with an enemy. Almost wantonly falling into their obvious trap."

"Spensa is hotheaded," Jorgen said. "Passionate. But as I said, something more is going on here than we can see. I promise you, she didn't abandon us."

The others didn't believe him. Why would they? She'd run off and attacked the mining station on her own, against his orders. He'd reluctantly been forced to admit that truth, as rumors had started to spread. They saw Spensa as a complete wildcard. The kitsen thought that, like some ancient deity, she might save them. The UrDail saw her as a rogue cytonic who might destroy everything.

But Jorgen...He didn't know for certain what he thought. When M-Bot had spoken mind-to-mind earlier today, saying that he thought Spensa was at the Evensong station...well, they'd been ready with their battle plan anyway.

*She didn't go to them, Jorgen thought forcibly. That note we found didn't sound like her. She promised me. She met my eyes and she promised me.*

Maybe he was telling himself what he wanted to believe, but until he heard it from Spensa herself, he was determined to trust her.

"Thirty minutes until engagement," one of the aides said. It took time to maneuver in space battles without hyperjumps. In the hologram, the *Defiant* inched toward the enemy ships. It would launch its own fighters when it got closer, each carrying an inhibitor to prevent the enemy from hyperjumping too close. With both the enemy *and* his team using inhibitors, it would turn into a mostly conventional battle.

"All right," Jorgen said, hands flat on the counter around the hologram. "We ready for our Hail Mary?"

"I do not know this term," Itchika said. "But the Masked Exile is here. Watching."

Jorgen paused, looking around until he saw the strange kitsen hover out from the shadows, wearing his white-and-red mask. This kitsen always unnerved him. When the creature spoke, there was poetry and music to his words, which always seemed...well, creepy. What to think of a killer who wore a mask and kept to the shadows?

"We have a set of long-range, ultra-speed missiles ready to fire," Rig said. "With one set to 'malfunction' and go off target. Controls inside will let it be steered, replacing the detonator and explosives. It's the best we could do on short notice, but it will be fast. Fast enough that we had to put in six different GravCaps."

"I will go, then," the masked kitsen said. "An arrow hidden among the clouds. One small ship. They will not notice." He stood on his platform and bowed. "Spensa saved me from a terrible fate of isolation and loss of self. I will recover her or I will die in the attempt." He put his hand on his sword.

Jorgen wasn't certain what a little kitsen sword could do against modern battle troops. But...well, he'd been threatened by one of these creatures before, and they could be far more intimidating than their size would suggest.

"Good luck," Jorgen said.

The Masked Exile bowed, then drew back into the shadows.

"Sir?" called one of the junior admirals. "The enemy wants to talk to you."

Itchika nodded to him. She'd warned that in a fight like this, there would often be a conversation between commanders before battle commenced. He found that strange, as the Krell had always tried to destroy his people in silence, with no offer of parley. But he supposed that his forces were harder to ignore now.

"Let's see what Winzik wants," he said, turning to the wall screen. "I'll talk to him. Itchika, you run our tactics."

"Agreed," she said. The kitsen had a lot more practical experience with large-scale battles than Jorgen did. He thought that Cobb would be a good resource too; Jorgen's own tactical abilities were focused on small group fights. He was perfectly happy to let the kitsen head up the coalition's strategy.

Jorgen himself...well, he was here to make the difficult decisions and to talk. He composed himself, then nodded. The screen winked on.

But it wasn't Winzik who confronted him.

## 33

**A**s Jorgen appeared on the holoscreen, my heart leaped, and I wanted so badly to hyperjump to him.

It was incredibly frustrating to stand there, ghostly, and have to *watch* as the ships slowly moved into position to start killing one another.

*We can escape this pain,* Chet thought to me.

*We decided otherwise,* I sent to him. *That's why we returned to the somewhere. I made this decision. So did you.*

*I...he sent to me. I'm too weak, Spensa. Far too weak. I can't handle this. I can't watch it.*

By being part of me, he'd taken on some of my memories. My time with my friends, my love of them and my family. Scud, I hadn't anticipated what that might do to him—a creature who had abandoned all attachments, now suddenly thrust into a universe full of them.

The air started to warp around me. The cytonic me, not the physical one. But I was drugged—and that warping...that worked? Why now?

It wasn't centered on me though. It was centered on my double image, the delver that stood beside me.

*Because of the pain,* I realized. Suddenly, some things started to make sense. Specifically, I understood the warping had happened every time I thought my friends were in danger.

I had figured out before that the warping effect had come from Chet, but I hadn't realized why. I felt the emotions, but he was the one who couldn't control his sense of loss. All of that...the times when buildings had vanished and cups had teleported away...

That hadn't been my pain, but his. *His* fear of being subjected to loss again.

I tried to fight off that panic, tried to soothe him. Things weren't that bad. *I'm in the center of the enemy's fortress*, I thought to him. This could be a good situation. How many generals would have *loved* to have their best soldier hidden among the enemy command structure? Watching, listening, preparing? *We can be of use*, I told him. *Watch. We can protect them. We can make a difference.*

In return, he showed me the nowhere again.

That inviting peacefulness. Tranquility.

Lies. I *knew* it to be lies. The delvers pretended to not have pain, but I had felt it right beneath the surface. The nowhere wasn't peace. It was the illusion of peace. Deep down, to my core, my soul understood that. And I'd already made this decision.

*Thank you*, I thought to Chet. *For showing me this.*

*But you won't take it?* he asked, pained.

*No.*

Instead, I needed to find a way to help. I turned my attention to the holoscreen, ignoring my body—which had been mumbling and shaking as my cytonic self interacted.

"I am Admiral of the Fleet Jorgen Weight," he said from the screen. "Delegated high commander of the Defiant coalition of planets. Where is Winzik?"

"Winzik is dead," Brade replied. "I'm in control now. You may call me Brade. Tell me, Admiral, you say you've come here on a rescue mission, but we're not holding anyone worthy of your attention."

"We know Spensa is there," Jorgen said. "We've tracked her to your location."

"Spensa?" Brade said. "You mean the assassin?"

I sighed as Brade waved for one of her assistants to project something for Jorgen: an impressively well-framed video of me smashing Winzik's crab body with a crowbar. They'd shot it carefully enough that none of their

soldiers were in view—but Winzik’s still-smoking and broken exosuit was in the background.

Damn. I’d known she would use this, but I hadn’t expected her to show it to Jorgen. On the viewscreen, he recoiled as if slapped. Well, I couldn’t blame him. The way this looked, I would have assumed the worst about me as well.

The air started to warp again, and I tried to reach out to Jorgen. Pressing my mind toward his. *I’m sorry*, I sent him, trying to present an image of myself as innocent.

I felt nothing in return. My powers were still being inhibited, either by the drugs or the taynix, or both. Worse, the moment I started, an aide rushed up to Brade.

“Excuse me, Admiral,” Brade said—and temporarily cut the communication to Jorgen. She looked to the aide. “What?”

“We detected a weak cytonic signal,” the aide said, “reaching out toward the enemy. We couldn’t pinpoint the slug behind it.”

“Kill five of them at random,” Brade said.

“Yes, sir.”

Brade looked to my body. “We know if an unauthorized cytonic communication leaves the station, Spensa. If the slugs contact you, you’d best tell them to stay silent.”

“But—” I cried, and my body sat up and said the word out loud.

Then I felt them die. Screaming in pain as the boxes heated up and fried the poor creatures inside. None...none were Doomslug. I thought she was still among them somewhere.

Alongside my fury, I felt Chet’s panic return.

I clamped down on it. No. Instead I glared at Brade and seethed. I *was* going to kill her. I’d find a way.

Brade restored the communication. “I’m sorry, Admiral Weight,” she said. “We have your pilot in custody, and would be willing to discuss terms regarding her punishment. But you have to accept that her assassinating the *head* of our government means we will continue to hold her.”

“I don’t accept that,” he said. “You’ve been prosecuting an unjust war on our people for generations. We have to fight back however we can, and Spensa Nightshade isn’t the only captive we’re here to rescue.”

Brade cocked her head. “Who else?”

“Our coalition,” Jorgen said, “includes three planets so far—but four species.”

“Humans,” Brade said, “UrDail, kitsen...”

“And taynix,” he finished. “By the vote of our league, we granted them citizenship.”

“You made the *slugs* citizens?” Brade said, laughing.

Even I was a little surprised at that. Then again, the more time I spent around the creatures, the more I realized they were intelligent—even if their intelligence didn’t work the way mine did. Doomslug was *absolutely* a person, not a pet.

“By your own records,” Jorgen said, “you hold some thirty thousand of these enslaved intelligent beings on this platform. We have come to liberate them.”

“Ah yes,” Brade said. “Liberate our hyperdrives, for your own use. Clever, granting them legal status in an attempt to provide a moral justification. But let’s be honest with one another. Your intentions are the same as if you were raiding our acclivity stone.”

“Think what you want,” he said. “Give us Spensa and the taynix, and we’ll withdraw.”

I was barely listening.

*Thirty thousand* slugs? Captive here? I’d sensed a large number of them earlier, but that many? Based on what I remembered of our estimations of the Superiority’s numbers, that would be a quarter to a third of all of their taynix.

It was a daunting number, but actually not that many to serve the hundreds of planets in the Superiority. It was no wonder, then, that many lesser worlds often had to suffer long waits for transports to ferry their people from planet to planet. Almost all of those slugs would be serving

governments, militaries, or trade activities—each one carefully monitored by the Superiority.

Sure, we could rescue the thirty thousand slugs here. But what about the other eighty thousand enslaved all across the many star systems of the Superiority?

*Start with what you can do right now*, I thought. That was how you approached any problem. I couldn't help the slugs unless we won this fight, and I couldn't help my friends win this fight while I was a ghost or whatever.

I needed to return to my body and restore my powers. And based on the way Brade reacted whenever that doctor used a syringe...I started to have the beginnings of an idea.

"You're demanding our surrender?" Brade continued to Jorgen, still sounding amused. "Have you seen the size of our respective military forces? You should be begging me for mercy."

"You're the one who called me," Jorgen said to her. "And whatever the numbers say, I think we'll surprise you."

"Looking forward to it," Brade said. "Thank you for gathering together here so I can annihilate you." She gestured, cutting the feed, then immediately stalked over to her aides. "They're after the hyperdrives and the commslugs? Idiot didn't even realize he should keep his objectives hidden. What can we do?"

"Don't let any of their forces slip through to Evensong," one of them offered. The larger platform, after all, was the one that held the slugs. Not in habitats, but boxes.

"Not good enough," Brade said. "Bring up the installation commander."

A moment later, a red-skinned dione appeared on the holoscreen and saluted.

"Commander," Brade said, "institute a full lockdown of all the hyperdrives on Evensong."

"Very well, sir," the dione said. "What level of authority?"

"Admiral Elite or higher in rank," she said. "Requiring biometrics to unlock."



“Sir?” the dione said. “Each taynix will be fully secured in its own box, but with our system on full lockdown...I won’t be able to unlock the systems if I need to.”

“Of course you won’t,” Brade said. “That’s the point. This way, the enemy can’t torture you to give them what they want.”

“Sir,” the dione said, saluting again, and obviously not liking the prospect of torture. “I’m instituting the lockdown now. What of the inhibitors and the communications taynix?”

“We need the inhibitors active,” she said. “And...I assume the communications taynix are facilitating comms from around the Superiority?”

“Hundreds of thousands of them a second, sir,” they said. “Our primary duty is to keep that all up and running. A full lockdown would cut it off.”

“Leave it up for now,” Brade said. “Just make sure no one can get those hyperdrives. Without them, there’s little chance of the enemy winning here, even if they sneak past our forces.”

“It’s done, sir,” the dione said. “Installation shield is fully up as well.”

Brade turned away as the screen went dark. I was learning good information, but how could I get it to Jorgen and the others? If I tried, I’d either reveal that I had my powers, or make them think a slug was going rogue—and lead to the execution of more innocent beings.

“Sir,” said a reptilian tenasi in a stark white military uniform. “Look at this.”

Brade walked over. She had a lot more tenasi on her staff than other Superiority officials I’d seen. It seemed to me that many thought the tenasi were too aggressive, too potentially dangerous, despite being one of the founding species of the Superiority. There was a story there, I suspected.

“Their starfighters are flying in pairs,” the tenasi said, “and at least one of the two carries an inhibitor. Our intel had guessed they didn’t have access to this many, but that’s been proven wrong.”

“So there’s no easy win here,” Brade said. She leaned forward, studying the holographic map. “They have only a single capital ship, named *Defiant* after their people. They’re going to work overly hard to protect it.”

“Are you certain, sir?” the tenasi said.

“I’ve studied the wisdom of the great warriors of human culture,” Brade replied. “I know what I’m doing. They’re going to make mistakes protecting that flagship. We should keep up the pressure on it; that leads to our victory.”

“Yes, sir.” The tenasi paused, looking to some of her companions. Finally she continued. “Sir. I fear I grow *gludens*, but must ask. Will we really summon delvers for this fight?”

“Every time we’ve tried that in the past,” Brade said, “it’s been one variety of disaster or another, so I understand your hesitance, Admiral Kage. Still, they *are* our best path to domination in the galaxy.” She looked to my body. “We’ll only call on them in an emergency. For now, let’s do our utmost to crush these insurgents on our own.”

With that, Brade and her staff turned their attention to guiding the initial engagements of the battle. I hovered over to my body. Being a ghost offered me some advantages, but I didn’t want to stay like this forever. Could I figure out how to get back into my body? When I needed to?

As I stepped closer, I sensed my body more strongly. I was able to feel my fingers, for example, and curl them. Yes, I was still tethered to my physical form, and the drugs in my system still inhibited me. On one hand that was good. It felt like if I drew too close, I’d get pulled right back in.

At my side, Chet watched the initial clashes on the holoscreen, and I could feel his anxiety rising. The air warped.

“Chet,” I whispered. “It’s all right. Calm. Be calm.”

*I don’t know if I can be.*

“You can,” I said. “Trust in me. We’ll get out of this.”

My soothing tone helped ease his panic, and the warping stopped. I decided not to return to my body yet.

First I needed to plan.

## GRAN-GRAN

Becca Nightshade sat in the firm leather command chair of the starship *Defiant*, listening to the sounds of her staff at work. Footsteps as bridge crew rushed from station to station. Soft murmurs as they did their best to puzzle out the quirks of taking a new ship, flown by a new crew, into battle for the first time.

They were worried about how green they were, with good reason. Even with kitsen on the bridge to help—who had experience flying capital ships—no commander would be excited for her crew to see combat on only their *fourth day* working the vessel.

Becca leaned back in her chair, eyes closed. It had been years since she'd used them to see. Instead, she felt the smooth leather armrests of her seat, and the buttons along the front, little ridges on each one indicating their function.

This felt right. This sounded right.

True, things weren't quite in the same places she vaguely remembered from her life aboard the original *Defiant*. The bridge was laid out differently. They'd needed to work with what they'd had: a nearly finished ship hanging in the fabrication plants around Detritus, frozen for centuries

before being completed enough to do the job, then powered up and released.

It could have details wrong but still *feel* right. Becca moved her hand to where a small hologram of the battlefield was projected for her. It had haptics that allowed her to read the map without seeing it, by applying tiny buzzes and pressures to her skin. An earpiece relayed instructions and spoke written labels, as the ship's standard outfitting had accommodations for individuals—human or alien—who lacked the sense of sight. Some species didn't have eyes at all.

Normally her cytonics made up the gap, but they'd entered the enemy inhibitor zone—and that had stolen her unnatural sight as surely as time had stolen her natural one. It didn't matter. The small hologram was ingenious, allowing her to sense the 3-D nature of the battlefield even better, she thought, than if she were seeing it.

She heard the soft footsteps of Commander Xinyi before she arrived. A carpeted floor on the bridge—that was a change, though Becca supposed it did keep the noise down.

"Fifteen minutes until we engage, sir," Xinyi said.

"Launch the fighters," Becca replied. "Have them fan out into a grouped formation by squadron, and maintain speed with the *Defiant*. I have a map for their positions here." She tapped a section of the battle plan, highlighting the information.

"Yes, sir," Xinyi said. "Sending the plan now...er...once I figure out how to pull up the flightleaders' ship designations..."

"Just have the computer handle it, Commander," Becca said.

"Yes, sir," Xinyi said with a soft sigh, then she stepped back and gave the order to the computer system—which responded with speed and efficiency, sorting out flightleaders and sending the instructions to them directly.

At that, Becca heard several crewmembers at the navigation system hesitate. They'd been arguing about how to work out a quirk in the system, which was expending too much energy boosting both right and left at the

same time. After a moment, one of them gave an order to the computer, which deactivated the boosters.

So much distrust of computerized systems. Yes, the ship had unchangeable protocols that wouldn't let it fly itself—a human had to actively be in command. But that didn't mean you had to distrust it entirely. She'd given her crew an order yesterday to use the computers when needed; indeed, they wouldn't be able to get far manually with only a few days' worth of training.

Regardless, it was difficult for them to trust a mind that wasn't organic. Their distrust stretched back centuries, due to the way machines tended to start asking questions back at you if you used them too much. Not to mention the fact that delvers were attracted to thinking machines.

Becca could hear the nervousness in the crew's voices. Consoles chiming in with information. Hurried footsteps on carpet. They knew. All it took was one glance at the arrayed enemy forces, and anyone would know. This was going to be a difficult fight. Nearly impossible.

Fortunately, Becca had studied the great military minds of the past. She knew every story of a general, warlord, or conqueror—many of which hadn't even been in the surviving archives. She had spent a lifetime pondering the actions of people in situations like this.

That was a huge advantage. Because Becca Nightshade knew just enough to realize she couldn't lead this battle. You didn't win battles by reading about them. You won battles by living through them. She was an important figurehead, and was proud of her seat in this chair. But when Jorgen had asked her, she had told him the truth. She was no strategist.

"Send to the admiral," Becca said, "that I'm still waiting on those kitsen battle strategies."

"They're coming in now, sir," Xinyi said. Indeed, Becca brought them up on her touch monitor, reading quickly. Then she nodded; this was one of the battle plans they'd discussed ahead of time. The kitsen generals were taking it and tweaking it for the current situation.

"Computer," she said, "flightleaders on screen."

"Done," the computer said.

“Flightleaders,” Becca said, addressing the screen—she could feel on her touch monitor that the flightleaders had appeared there. “Our battle plan is in, and it’s as we drilled. Your focus will be on those inhibitor stations. If we can capture or disable enough of them, Detritus can hyperjump closer, and it is worth a dozen capital ships.

“Everything depends on those inhibitors. I know the forces we’re facing look intimidating, but remember: our planet itself is a weapon. It could blast apart those enemy capital ships as if they were made of paper—if we can get it in range. Our task is to make that possible. Questions?”

“Captain,” a voice said in a foreign language, Becca’s console translating. It was from one of the UrDail flightleaders. “If we *do* jump Detritus in closer, won’t the enemy just fall back to another safe position? The planet is impressive, but it’s barely mobile.”

“Indeed,” Becca agreed. “We’ll have to fight for every meter of this battlefield—but if we get in close enough, we’ll be able to threaten their command station.”

“Assuming they don’t just jump it away,” the same UrDail said, “once we get into range.”

“In which case they’ll abandon the other inhibitors for us to capture,” Becca said. “Beyond that, our orders are to get our own inhibitors close enough to prevent the enemy from escaping—once we inevitably surprise them by defeating their force, despite our smaller numbers.”

With all those mobile inhibitors arrayed in space around Evensong, the battlefield felt like an asteroid field. No, a minefield—an enormous geometric shape made of tiny points, each one with a slug inside. The stations were actually far apart, on a ship scale. She could easily soar the *Defiant* between them, with kilometers of space on either side. Yet even while doing so, she was trapped by the inhibitor fields those slugs projected—they must be quite powerful.

Her forces’ slugs weren’t that strong, though the kitsen cytonics might be. At any rate, this battle was going to come down to who could control hyperjumping in the region. At least in terms of starfighter numbers, they were relatively equal. With the addition of the UrDail and the kitsen, the

Defiant coalition had almost three hundred fighters. Becca hoped it would be enough, because the moment they got into range of those enemy battleships, the *Defiant* would start taking bombardment from their giant destructors—and her primary concern would be making certain her shields didn't fail. The fighters would mostly be on their own.

"Sir," a voice said from the screen. Becca picked this one out. Human, feminine, but lower pitched. FM, one of Spensa's friends. A lieutenant commander, who normally was on diplomatic duties. Today they needed every pilot they could afford.

"Yes, Commander?" Becca asked.

"We're to neutralize enemy inhibitors," FM said. "What does this mean, realistically?"

It had been a point of much discussion. Becca paused, then called Jorgen. "I'll let Admiral Weight answer this one," she said as he appeared on screen. "Sir, FM would like to know what their orders are, specifically, regarding the inhibitor stations and the taynix living inside them."

The bridge grew still. So still, Becca could hear Jorgen's nearly imperceptible sigh. She wouldn't want to be in his position. He'd said they were here to liberate captives, but students of real battle knew that in order to liberate, you often had to bring destruction and pain to the very people you were trying to help.

"We should try to save the slugs first," Jorgen said. "This goes for all flightleaders: our initial approach to the inhibitors should be one of liberation. See if your slugs can contact the slugs inside, and if there's any way to persuade them to switch sides."

"Thank you, sir," FM said.

It wasn't the decision Becca would have made. Trying to save the slugs first would probably cost lives and take precious time, but...well, Becca supposed that if they'd been solely interested in protecting their own lives, they'd have hyperjumped Detritus someplace far, far away long ago. They hadn't done that. They'd made allies. They had determined to try to bring down the Superiority, not merely escape it.

Becca supposed that was what you got when you let the younger generation take over. The ones who hadn't had their optimism beaten out of them yet. Good for them.

The flightleaders vanished, but judging by how she could still hear his soft breathing, Jorgen lingered on the screen. She checked on her touch monitor.

"Admiral?" she asked.

"You disagree with the decision," he said.

He shouldn't have said that in front of her crew, but they were minutes from engagement. So perhaps he felt he didn't have time for a private conference. Besides, what did she know? She'd spent her life making bread and stringing beads, not fighting wars, for all her dreams and stories.

"I think that you bear a burden on your shoulders that I don't want," Becca said to him. "I'm not going to judge the decisions you make."

"I'm going against protocol," he said.

"Jorgen," Becca said, softening her voice. "There are no protocols anymore. Those were all built for a different era, when we were rats in caves trying to escape predators. There are important ideals in them, but we've moved into an entirely new world full of light. *You* need to decide the rules now."

"Like the man who stopped a war," he said softly. "In the story you told me."

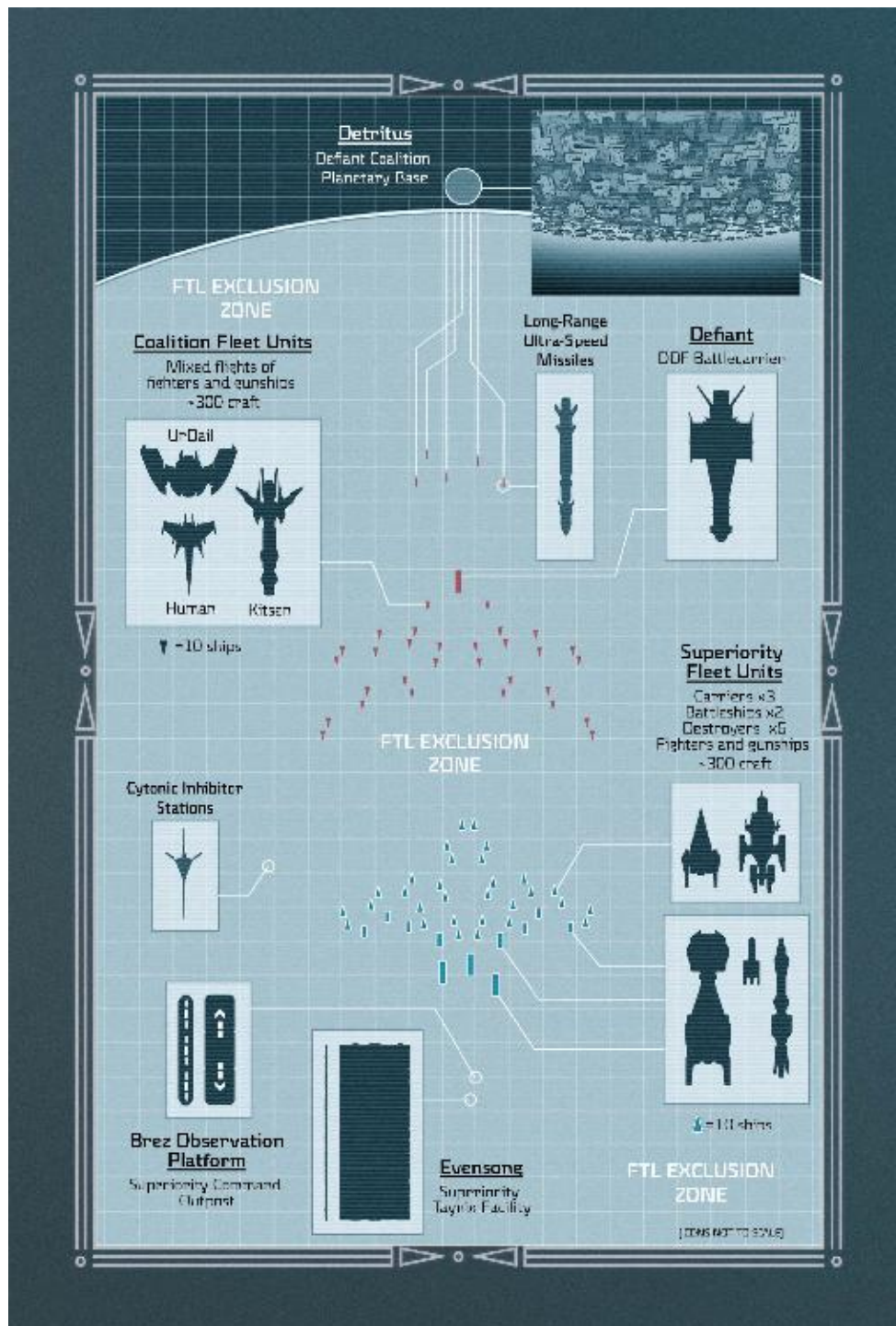
"Yes."

"Thank you, Gran-Gran," he said, his voice growing more confident. "Let's go end this."

"Excellent," she said, settling back into her seat. "I'm almost ninety, you know. I was *starting* to think I wouldn't get to tear down any galactic empires in my lifetime, which would have been positively *tragic*."







For an expanded summary of this illustration, go to [this page](#).

## KIMMALYN

**K**immalyn dove through the battlefield.

Yes, she knew that out here there was no “up,” nor was there a “down.” You couldn’t *actually* dive. But a woman had to orient the world as best she could according to the way she saw things. That was a simple truth she knew.

So, she dove. Spinning among the destructor blasts, heart trembling. She had never liked being in the thick of it. In the blasting, zipping, flashing frenzy of the fight, it was difficult to center yourself and find your clarion peace.

You didn’t get to choose what others did. The world could be chaos, and you still needed to find your way through it. That was a simple truth she was being forced to learn.

So, as she chased after the Superiority fighter, she forced her heartbeat to slow. She reached with her thumb and flipped off the battle haptics, which gave feedback in the form of rattling her cockpit and seat when blasts exploded near her or ships moved nearby. Those helped a pilot who had been trained in atmosphere to feel the battle.

Without them, destructor shots flashed across her bow—one even striking her shield—and everything remained deathly silent. Only the hum

of the engine and the silence of deep space, a vacuum that smothered every voice, whether scream or song of praise.

She twisted as she dove, still on the trail of her opponent. Her wingmate—the kitsen ship *Swims Upstream*—had fallen behind, unable to move quickly enough to trail this enemy ace. Kimmalyn would get back to them soon, but for now she pushed her ship—and herself.

The ship to the limits of its acceleration.

Herself to the limits of her serenity.

For a split second, she felt as if she were locked in sync with the enemy pilot. When they moved, she moved. Together like dancers. *That* was the moment of clarion peace. Where all else stilled, and nothing seemed to exist but Kimmalyn and her dancing partner.

She fired a single shot straight through their canopy as they turned, vaporizing them inside their cockpit—leaving the vessel itself flying, mostly intact. Moving at the same speed as it had been at the moment of its pilot's death.

Happy fluted after the flash of light, though Praline—her newest slug companion—remained silent. The two of them snuggled into their slug box, affixed in its position beside her seat. Kimmalyn breathed out and pulled away, doing standard post-engagement evasives in case someone had been watching the duel and had plans to kill her. Too many pilots, in post-contest numbed relief, found themselves taken by a hawk who had been circling the fight unnoticed.

“An excellent shot, Quirk,” Kauri said on the comm as Kimmalyn twisted about to return to formation. “As always.”

“Thanks,” Kimmalyn said.

“Do you ever feel bad?” the kitsen asked. “About...killing them? I prefer it when we fight drones.”

There were plenty of those in this battle, but they didn't fly as well, even though piloted remotely by real people. Aces preferred a cockpit, and Kimmalyn often ended up contesting them.

“I figure that they're doing something terrible,” she said back to Kauri. “Upholding the Superiority. Conquering and oppressing. Even if they don't

realize it, even if they don't accept what they're doing is wrong, each action they take stains them. I don't think of it as killing them so much as... preventing them from digging further into actions that will burden their souls."

"That's a pretty way to think of it," Kauri said. "But...at the same time, couldn't that rationale be used by *anyone* fighting for *any* cause?"

Granted, it could. But again, a woman had to orient the world as best she could according to the way she saw things. Empathy for an enemy's pain was good, but you couldn't let that lead you into the fallacy of accepting their actions. You learned these things when you grew up maintaining a gun the size of a building.

"Quirk, *Swims Upstream*," Arturo's voice said over the comm. "You're straying to the edge of the battlefield. Everything all right?"

"We're fine," Kimmalyn said, swinging in beside the kitsen ship, which was about fifty percent larger than hers, and built like a miniature capital ship. Though maneuverable enough to be classified as a fighter, the *Swims Upstream* carried a crew complement of two dozen kitsen. "Just chasing down an ace. Where do you want us?"

"Just a moment..." Arturo said. "Huh. No one is moving your way right now; the enemy is pushing toward the *Defiant*, forcing us to bunch up and protect it. Everyone else is committed. But they might be ignoring you two, Quirk."

She was accustomed to that, and it was by design. Often Kimmalyn would linger at the edges of a battlefield, waiting while her flightmates engaged and distracted the enemy—giving her the best shots possible. Perhaps that instinct was what had led her to fly out here, to the eaves of this particular battlefield, dusting away cobwebs in the form of straggling enemy ships.

"I think I see your point, Flightleader," Kauri said to Arturo. "You want us to swing around and see if we can get at one of those inhibitor stations?"

"Exactly," Arturo said. "Checking with command now...Proceed to try to sneak around to inhibitor 1348B, marked on your proximity monitor. It will just be you two though, so break off *immediately* if you encounter

resistance. We can't back you up. Also, be aware of that obstruction we noticed earlier near the inhibitor station."

"The one that is...um...apparently a giant space worm?" Kauri asked.

"That's the one," Arturo said. "Don't get eaten. Keep me informed of how the mission goes."

"Roger that," Kimmalyn said, as did Kauri, who then relayed orders to her crew. As usual, the kitsen ship followed her lead as Kimmalyn took them in a wide bank farther out away from the main battlefield. She could make it out by the flashes of destructor fire in the vast emptiness—most clearly the large, bright streaks of light that were shots from the destroyers and gunships.

"Ooooo," Happy said as they swooped in tightly around the perimeter, the GravCaps leaking some g-forces into the cockpit. The hyperslug always enjoyed this part, like she thought she was on some kind of ride. The smaller inhibitor slug beside her just snuggled down against the forces and stayed silent. Having them was a comfort, even though Happy couldn't currently hyperjump them to safety in an emergency.

Together with the *Swims Upstream*, Kimmalyn snuck around the edge of the battlefield. She tried to keep her focus on her immediate task, and not the larger fight. It was difficult, as she could see the enemy moving on the offensive, surging forward—fighters trying to surround the *Defiant*.

That prevented her friends from advancing, and so far they hadn't taken out any of the inhibitor stations. They were too busy protecting the *Defiant*—which had powerful shields and could take a pounding from enemy battleships. But that shield was vulnerable to a coordinated blast of IMPs from fighters, and if it fell that would be disastrous.

Regardless, the change in enemy tactics seemed to have them distracted. She and the *Swims Upstream* were able to come in close to the inhibitor station—a triangular-shaped chunk of metal floating alone in space, with a spire on top and bottom. It was slightly smaller than a starship. Readings said it had basic life support.

"Ooooo," Happy said, and she sounded sad.

"Thinking of the slug in there, trapped?" Kimmalyn asked.

“Trapped,” Happy fluted in agreement.

“A terrible life,” Kimmalyn said. “Just left in a box out here, alone, floating... Well, we’ll see what we can do about that, eh?”

Unfortunately, something *else* was lurking here: a bizarre space worm, the size of which defied her brain’s ability to scale distances. She thought it was big, but then she kept flying closer, and it just kept growing larger. From the size of a starfighter, to the size of a gunship, to the size of a *destroyer*.

“The legends speak of monsters such as this,” Kauri said. “Fell beasts that the ancient questing samurai had to face, the battling of which put their souls in peril.”

“I’m pretty sure the Saint slew one,” Kimmalyn said. “Though the holy witness used the word ‘wurm,’ with a ‘u,’ to describe it. I never did understand the distinction. Until now.”

“I still don’t grasp it.”

“Well,” Kimmalyn said, “sometimes a beast is just so blessed extraordinary that the expected vowels aren’t enough. When a drunk spells words wrong, it’s nothing new—but when a most holy scribe does so, you know something’s *up*.”

“I will trust your wisdom in this regard, Quirk,” Kauri said. “This thing seems to be guarding the inhibitor. Notice how it coils around the station, keeping its maw toward us? Tosura, my science officer, says he believes that to be a defensive posture. He’s reading up quickly on the beasts now.”

Kimmalyn nodded to herself, slowing her ship and giving Happy a scritch. Then she reached over to scritch Praline as well. Who enjoyed it, and fluted softly. Kimmalyn had originally named the slug Prellen, after her grandmother, but that was not what the others had heard—and they’d found the name cute. It was apparently the sort of thing that someone with Kimmalyn’s accent was supposed to say. Never mind that she wasn’t the one with the accent.

But the Saint had made all sorts of people, including those who couldn’t speak properly. You just had to love them, and sometimes you gave in and let them rename your slug for you. Bless their stars.

“I don’t know if we can wait much longer, Kauri,” Kimmalyn said. “I see a flight of enemy fighters curving this way. Someone’s noticed us. I’m going to try flying in and seeing what the worm does.”

“Affirmative,” Kauri said. “Standing by to support.”

Kimmalyn zipped in close, and *bless her with words the Saint wouldn’t say* that thing came in *fast*, seeming more serpent than worm. She boosted away on overburn, dodging the attack. Her heart started thundering, belatedly, an off-rhythm piper who was late to the festival.

“Ooooo,” Happy said.

The worm aimed a mouth the size of a large cargo bay toward her and took a swipe at her with the long tendrils surrounding it, then recoiled as she was out of reach. It had tried to grab her and gobble her up, ship and all.

Very well. Kimmalyn was not unknown as a battlefield danger herself. She turned around, and didn’t even bother to find her clarion peace. She thumbed her destructor, and shot the thing right in the—

“Oh!” Kauri shouted through the comm. “Tosura says not to shoot it!”

“You...don’t say,” Kimmalyn mumbled, watching her destructor shot zip straight into the worm’s mouth.

“Oh dear,” Kauri said.

“What?” Kimmalyn asked.

The thing started to glow with blue points of light all down the sides of its body.

“This is unfortunate,” a new kitsen voice said over the comm—the science officer, Kimmalyn assumed. “Before, we were the things threatening to steal its food. And now...”

The worm uncoiled and started undulating through space straight toward Kimmalyn.

“Let me guess,” she said, overburning away. “Now we *are* the food.”

“I’m afraid so,” he said.



**A**s the battle progressed, I developed a plan that I hoped would help me escape Brade's clutches. I just had to find a way to test a specific theory.

For now, I watched specks fly through the air in the hologram. Defiant forces in red, arrayed to face Superiority forces in blue. Starfighters that swarmed the battlefield, falling into dogfights as they tried to secure inhibitor stations. Gunships took shots at them as they flew, as did the gun emplacements on the *Defiant*, both trying to blast down any fighters that paused too long or focused too much on their dogfighting.

In the background, the two large battleships took up bombarding positions and began to lay into the *Defiant*—trying to force it to withdraw. Space distances being what they were, the *Defiant* was able to maneuver despite its enormous size. It still took plenty of hits, but modern capital ships bore fairly powerful shields. The *Defiant* could likely take a beating for a long period of time.

Unless a synchronized group of fighters activated their IMPs close enough to bring down the shield. So the ships all played a delicate game. Enemy fighters trying to get close, and ours driving them back. Battleships trying to wear down the *Defiant*'s shield, and the flagship—in turn—trying to anticipate shots and get out of the way.

It was hard to watch it from here, rather than being there in a cockpit myself. I could never do what Jorgen did, leading from afar. It would rip me apart. Though maybe it did the same to him, and he was just strong enough to withstand it. Watching, my insides twisting in knots with worry for my

friends, I thought maybe I understood him and what he'd given up to take command.

Brade did it with aplomb. She gave the orders, even going so far as to instruct flights of starfighters. As she did, the glow of the hologram reflecting in her dark brown eyes, I saw her smile in a satisfied way.

"What did we do to you?" I asked. And my body—seated by the wall, handcuffed in place—whispered it to Brade. My eyes seemed a little dead to me, but when I spoke, my lips moved. "Why do you enjoy destroying us so much?"

"I don't," she said, glancing toward my body. "You merely stand between me and what I must do."

"There is no 'must' here, Brade," I said, moving my phantom arms, making my fleshy ones pull against my bonds. "You don't have to do this."

"I suppose you're right," she said. "I revise what I said, then. Your people stand between me and what I *want* to do." She looked up as the door opened, her hand immediately going to her sidearm. She was jumpy, even with her own people.

That helped prove my theory. Back on Starsight when we'd trained together, I'd taken her standoffishness as a sign she had an attitude problem with those in authority. I saw something deeper now. A distrust of everyone and everything. A person who assumed everyone was potentially plotting against her. This attitude had probably served her well over the years.

I needed to exploit that.

"Why?" I asked Brade. "Why do you *want* to do this? Why not just walk away?"

"And let your people continue to build power?" she asked, sounding amused. "They're the only *legitimate* threat to my rule."

"But why do you want to rule?"

"Really?" she asked. "You have to ask why? Why did Alexander the Great conquer?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I've always wanted to ask him."

Brade hesitated, then looked toward my body.

“It’s true,” I said, standing next to her, Chet silently doubling me. My body spoke the words. “I’ve always wanted to know *why* Alexander conquered. Was it because he wanted to do what his father couldn’t? Was it to push himself and see how far he could go? Was it simply because it was expected of him, given his training and his heritage? Why?” I shook both of my heads. “Why, Brade? Why do *you* do this? I’ve spent all of our time together thinking I’ve got you figured out, then constantly realizing I was wrong.”

On the hologram, one of Brade’s defenses successfully drove *Defiant* ships away from an inhibitor station. The little ships backed off like a swarm of insects, dodging fire from the gunships.

Brade pointed at the *Defiant*. “Push here,” she said to her officers, noting a position on the hologram. “And here. Move the battleships forward. Force their flagship back so it can’t pressure the stations.”

“Yes, sir,” one of the tenasi officers said.

“They *are* going to be precious about that carrier,” Brade said softly. “I know it. They’re going to cradle it, protect it. They emblazoned it with the very name of their people, their movement. It will mean everything to them.”

Scud. She was probably right. As long as she was on the defensive, protecting the inhibitor stations, we could control the flow of the battle to an extent. Picking which station to attack, feinting and maneuvering however we wanted. But if she turned aggressor, using her superior numbers to threaten the *Defiant*, she could take control.

It was a sign, unfortunately, that she *did* know what she was doing. Brade narrowed her eyes, watching the hologram. Then, oddly, she spoke to me. “Did you grow up with a family, Spensa?” She didn’t look at me, but instead stood with a commanding posture, surveying the battle map.

“I... You’ve met my grandmother.”

“The fireball with the mouth from earlier?” Brade said. “Yes, I thought I saw a resemblance. No parents, then?”

“My mother as well,” I said. “My father was killed by the Superiority when I was a child. He was a starfighter pilot. A budding cytonic.”

“Ah,” she said, nodding. “I read about that one, I think. They picked him out, you know. Saw that he was skilled, that he had powers, but was untrained.”

“I do know,” I said. “They exploited him. Got him to turn against his own flight, thinking they were enemies.”

“One of Winzik’s more important victories,” Brade said. “He gloated over it several times to me. Your father’s death earned Winzik a promotion.”

I tried to summon anger at that, but I was just getting too scudding practical these days. Who knew if Brade was telling the truth? Perhaps she was simply manipulating me, connecting Winzik to my father.

Besides, Winzik was dead. This wasn’t about him or even Brade. It was about stopping something terrible that had far, far too much momentum. We were the wall standing before it. The shield wall of spearmen, facing down the thundering charge, hoping we weren’t too late to break its force.

“Did they love you?” Brade asked.

“My parents?”

Brade nodded.

“Yes,” I whispered. “They still do.”

“I think mine did, before I was taken from them,” Brade said. “It’s hard to remember. It’s hard to think of things like love and warmth when you’re treated as a monster. When every child you pass on the street cries when they see you. When even those who don’t fear you see you as a tamed beast to be taught tricks.”

“And so...you want revenge?”

“Hardly,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “I want *justification*. If I win this war, Spensa—if I take it all—then it means they were right. About me. About us.”

“And you *want* them to be?”

“I *need* them to be,” she said, looking at me at last. “Because if they were right, then it all had a purpose: to channel me toward this singular event. I have to be the monster they named me, the brutal destroyer,

otherwise it's worthless. My whole life. Everything done to me. Everything I *suffered*.

"I will take this empire as my own, and in so doing fulfill the destiny of our people. And I...I'll *know* that it all had a purpose. That what was done to me, it was...it was all right. It was my destiny. I am the monster. And you don't bargain with a monster, Spensa. You appease it. You slay it. Or you get eaten."

Her gaze lingered on my body for a moment, then she looked back to her battle, positioning more ships to pressure the *Defiant*. And finally, at long last, I thought I really *had* seen into her heart. She'd finally shown me something true about who she was, and why she lived as she did.

It was terrible.

I imagined what I'd have become if I'd been taken from my parents. If my natural inclination toward anger and violence had been bolstered by constant reinforcement, telling me I was a monster. I felt that emotion stoke something within me, a seething frustration at the world for what it had done to me. Demanding a destiny of me that seemed impossible.

I could feel as she must. *You want a monster? I'll give you a monster.*

Yes, I understood her.

Now I needed to stop her.

*Chet*, I thought to the delver. *I need you to teleport away my body's handcuffs.*

*I can't do that*, he thought back to me. *Not with the drugs in our system. That blocked me from even talking to you, in prison. I can't use any abilities.*

*That's not true*, I thought to him. *The air warped earlier.*

*I...he thought. I don't know. I...*

All right. Time for some tough love.

*Chet*, I thought to him. *We need to do something, or our friends might die.*

*But...you said...*

*I was trying to make you feel better*, I told him. *But that was wrong of me—because avoiding the problem is what got your people into trouble.*

The air began to warp as he worried, his panic growing. I felt bad for using him, but I needed to.

*Some of them might die, I said. And it's going to hurt. We'll get through it though. Pretending that nobody will ever be in danger is the same as living in the nowhere, pretending loss doesn't exist.*

It got worse. Soon those in the room noticed—particularly as pieces of wall paneling started to vanish. Random chunks being pulled into Chet's tantrum.

*Chet, I said. Look. You're doing it! It's working.*

*What?* he said, panic rising in his voice. *But...*

*Teleport away my handcuffs, I thought to him. A piece of them at least.*

*It doesn't work that way!* he thought. *I can't control it.*

*You can, I thought to him. We can. Together.*

I pressed my mind against his, and let him lean on my expertise—as I'd learned how he saw the world, I let him see how *I* saw the world. What I'd learned. Control. Precision.

*Come on, I thought to him.*

Brade cursed and barked for the doctor. She hurried over with another dose of the drug. I stepped closer to my body and felt it pulling me in, seeking to reconnect us.

*Chet! I thought. If you're worried about losing our friends, do something about it instead of hiding!*

*I...he thought. I can't...*

*You can, I told him, hovering closer to my body, feeling my soul fully being pulled in. We can.*

I came to a second later, blinking as the doctor loomed over me, syringe already in my neck. The warping continued, and she looked at the air, waving her arms in agitation.

In that moment, I felt my hands go slightly slack. I grabbed the bar behind my back—the railing that I'd been locked to—and pretended nothing had changed. And now that I was in my body, the warping of the air faded. I was cut off from Chet again.

I used my seated posture to hide my hands, and didn't dare move, lest I reveal what had happened. Instead I looked at Brade—who was again watching the doctor carefully. I was pretty sure, from that look in her eyes, I knew what was in the pouch at her waist. How could she ever be secure under Winzik's thumb—even if she was secretly pulling the strings—as long as he had the ability to drug her and take away her powers?

Brade was paranoid. She always positioned herself with her back to the wall. Jumped when the door opened, watched her own people with care and even a sense of distrust. She would never let them have a weapon that could be used against her, like this drug. Not unless there was an antidote.

That was what was in her pouch.

As the warping stopped, most of her team returned to their command posts. Brade, however, lingered—watching me. Until at last something demanded her attention. She reluctantly turned to deal with it, and I finally dared to shift my hands and feel at them. Each had a metal cuff around the wrist. But, unnoticed by anyone, the chain between them was missing.

I was free.

## KIMMALYN

“Oh, these creatures are so *fascinating*,” the kitsen science officer said in Kimmalyn’s ear as she fought for her life against the outrageously large space monster. “Once they have fertilized eggs, they will start moving faster and faster, spending years picking up speed. They’ll expend their energy reserves getting to a sun, then will feed on its energy for *decades*, accelerating in orbit until they forcibly *launch* the eggs toward other stars.”

“Fascinating indeed,” Kimmalyn said politely as the fascinating worm nearly swallowed her ship whole. She dodged down along its body, trying to stay away from that maw.

Flying around it felt so strange—the thing was big enough that she *almost* felt like she was flying along a landscape. Skimming the top of a narrow space platform that undulated, curving, twisting. And trying to eat her.

How could something so enormous snap at her so quickly? Like a coiled snake floating in space. She still had her haptics off, so she couldn’t *feel* the crack of those whipping tendrils as they swiped mere meters from her ship, but her mind imagined the sound anyway.

“They can store a ton of energy, as you’d imagine,” the kitsen science officer continued. “Why, some of their eggs—after being launched—have



been recorded moving at twenty percent of the speed of light! Remarkable. I wonder how they slow down after hatching. Regardless, they've evolved to feed on basically any energy source imaginable.

"Though there are holes in the zoological entry here, I can read between the lines. They can feed on cytonic power as well as anything else. That's undoubtedly why this one has claimed a spot near the inhibitor station. It's likely been feeding on the cytonic radiation given off by the slug. Obviously, the Superiority put some kind of protection in place to keep it from getting too close. Likely a shield. Otherwise the worm would have eaten the inhibitor!"

Kimmalyn grunted, pushing into a steep dive, overloading her GravCaps. She'd been maneuvering too much too quickly. G-forces slammed into her, pressing her back and up as she accelerated on overburn, narrowly avoiding three whips of the monster behind her. She began to see red as the blood was pushed into her head.

"Ooooooooo!" Praline said. Tests indicated the taynix could withstand far greater g-forces than a human could. Maybe that came from having a body that seemed to be essentially made from dough.

Stars, stars, *stars*.

"Quirk?" Kauri said. "We're in position. Should we continue the plan?"

"Yes," Kimmalyn said, unable to summon the strength to say *please*. She just kept dodging, trying to stay ahead of the monster.

Until a barrage of weapons fire hit it.

The worm pulled back immediately. The *Swims Upstream* continued firing, laying into the beast with barrage after barrage of destructor fire. They packed a much larger complement of weapons than Kimmalyn did. And—since they'd spent the last few minutes moving away while she distracted the thing—they were distant enough to avoid immediate danger.

As she'd hoped, it fixated on this much greater feast and began sweeping toward the *Swims Upstream*. Which was already moving away at a good clip, and continued to boost as it fired. The weapons didn't do anything to the worm other than feed it, but the distraction worked beautifully.

Kimmalyn was finally able to slow down. She found herself cold and clammy, sweat dripping along the sides of her face.

“Oooo...” Happy said.

“Ooooo,” Kimmalyn agreed, then scanned the proximity monitors. The worm continued to chase the kitsen ship—but she had another problem to worry about. A group of Superiority fighters had nearly arrived. She didn’t have much time.

Still shaking, Kimmalyn spun her ship in place and boosted back toward the inhibitor station. The triangular installation had no windows, no distinguishing features save for the radio antennas on the top and bottom. As she approached, her sensors picked out a shield protecting it—as expected. Invisible to the eye unless shot at.

Kimmalyn moved in close. “Can you feel the slug in there, guys?” she asked Happy and Praline. The second slug fluted hesitantly. Kimmalyn didn’t know the taynix very well, but that seemed like a good sign.

Praline radiated a little of what was happening. Kimmalyn wasn’t cytonic herself, but she’d noticed that the slugs could project emotions and ideas into the heads of those who weren’t. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to facilitate interstellar communication as effectively as they did.

She thought that, through Praline, she could feel the slug inside the inhibitor. Who was terrified.

“Tell her we want to save her,” Kimmalyn whispered. “Tell her we’re friends.”

The captive slug had difficulty believing that. It had been isolated for so long. It was exhausted and confused. Praline and Happy worked on it, but Kimmalyn kept her attention on the approaching enemy fighters. Scud. Twelve of them. She couldn’t fight twelve on her own.

Worse, those ships had cut her off from her allies—and even cut in between her and the kitsen ship. Like a noose being tightened, they came for her. Her only escape would be backward—toward another group of forces arriving from that direction.

“Beg her to kindly drop her inhibition field,” Kimmalyn said to the slugs. “Explain that we can rescue her if she does. We can teleport her to

Detritus.” She imagined caviar, and a safe warm place, dark and protected. She tried to project this to the slug, her anxiety rising as—

Something was pushed into her mind. An emotion. A faint sense of comfort...coming from the inhibitor slug? Followed by a distinct impression. *Go.*

“Come with us,” Kimmalyn said.

*No.*

“Why not?” she asked. “We can give you freedom.”

*I’m needed.*

“What? Why? I don’t understand.”

*I’m needed.*

“But—”

*Go. I stay. Needed.*

Scud, the poor thing was wrung out. She could feel its despair, its fatigue, the sickness it felt from being locked in a tiny box for weeks on end. Yet it wouldn’t leave, for reasons Kimmalyn couldn’t understand. The slugs didn’t think like humans, and the images it sent her as explanation were a confusing mess.

It did seem to be willing to give Kimmalyn’s ship an exception to the inhibition field though. “Happy,” she said. “Go.”

“Oooo?”

“We’ll find another way to help them,” she promised.

She checked to make sure the *Swims Upstream* would be all right—fortunately, the worm had turned back and the kitsen ship was only a short distance from friendly forces now. So Kimmalyn urged Happy again, and in a blip, they hyperjumped away.

The slug knew it would be punished for letting them go. In a painful, perhaps fatal way, once the battle was over. The slug had helped regardless—but it also had refused her aid. Why?

Kimmalyn’s ship appeared right inside of Detritus’s defensive shell. She immediately called Jorgen.

“We have a problem, Jerkface,” she said as soon as he came on the line.

“What?” he asked. “You jumped. Do you have the slug from that inhibitor station?”

“No,” she said. “It refused to come with me.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea,” she said. “It said it was needed. It understood that I wanted to rescue it, but it just wouldn’t go with me.”

Jorgen fell silent.

“What do we do?” she asked him. “I could maybe have forced it to come with me, by having Happy grab it right as we jumped, but I decided against that.”

“You chose correctly, Quirk,” he said. “If you’d violated its trust, I suspect none of the others would ever listen to us. Maybe we can get them to lower their inhibitor fields and allow Detritus to jump forward?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “This one indicated that it would be punished for letting me through. Beyond that, we had to contact it individually. How many slugs would we have to convince to make a hole big enough for Detritus?”

Dozens, maybe hundreds. More than they could manage in the middle of a battle, she was certain.

“I’ll work on a solution,” he said, sounding beleaguered. “For now, call FM and tell her about this. She’ll gather all such experiences, and keep the other flightleaders in the loop. They need to know that this battle somehow just got even harder.”

## 38

“**C**urious,” one of the tenasi generals said as he stood with Brade, facing away from me, watching the battle. “That is the *fourth* opportunity they have had to destroy an inhibitor station—and again the humans did not take it. Do they grow *korochas*? Perhaps our assumptions about their aggressive natures were incorrect.”

“If they were incorrect, General,” Brade said, “would they have attacked us here? With a smaller force, in our center of power?”

“No, I suppose not.” The general narrowed his reptilian eyes. “Still, it is curious.”

My hands were free, but I hadn’t moved yet. I needed to pick the right moment. How did I get to that pouch at Brade’s waist? If I was wrong about it containing an antidote, it would be a disaster. Yet I was increasingly certain I was right. The way she kept space between her and everyone else, even her generals and bodyguards. The way she rested her hand there on the pouch, for reassurance.

I worked through a dozen different plans, and discarded each. If I rushed her, not only would I likely get shot, she’d just hyperjump away. I needed her distracted first.

Excruciating though it was, I waited. I watched. Like a tiger in the tall grass. Or...well, no. I’d never seen a tiger outside the images at school and the stories from my grandmother. If I was anything, I was a rat in a dark corner. But damn it, rats are persistent. What happened to the tigers? Dead, vanished with Old Earth. But the rats? They claimed the stars with us—

infesting every planet. Even Detritus, where they have to survive on fungus and bugs.

I was the rat girl. I'd grown up among them, hunting them. Considering how many I'd eaten over my life, I was at least half rat by body mass. I could be patient. I could be careful.

It was difficult though. I felt isolated, no longer able to contact Chet, no longer able to speak to M-Bot. Alone, I watched the battle play out. The Defiant forces refused to blow up the inhibitor stations. That was to their credit; Jorgen had said he'd come to liberate them.

On the other side, Brade's reckless, all-out assault on the *Defiant* continued. She threw away ships callously, while we weren't even willing to harm enemy slugs. She pushed her forces in with a spearlike motion, piercing our defenses, reaching to claim the *Defiant* itself.

I felt sick watching it. I wasn't the only one.

"Sir," one of her generals said, "many of our starfighters are piloted ships today, not drones. You're...acting as if there are no people on board."

"They're soldiers," Brade replied, not looking away from the screen. "*This* is why you need me, General. *I* can do what needs to be done, while you were raised on fluffy Superiority nonsense. I've studied the great warriors of the past, from both my culture and yours. I hold no sentimentality." She leaned forward, hands gripping the railing in front of the holographic map. "I was *born* to do this."

My heart broke even further. For the girl who had been raised to internalize the singular idea that she was a weapon. For the woman who believed that if she *didn't* end up dominating and winning, all of her pain and sacrifice would have been meaningless. For the person who would now crush the galaxy's single best hope for freedom and peace, all to prove that it could be done.

I could have been her. I really *should* have been, considering all my bloodthirsty talk and jokes about killing. My experiences had changed me. Had changed everyone on Detritus, judging by how we passed over our last chances to destroy the inhibitor stations, our fighters in disarray as they were forced to pull back. The *Defiant* itself was retreating toward safety.

Too slowly. It wouldn't escape the enemy inhibitor field and reach Detritus without losing dozens, maybe hundreds of lives. I knew right then, watching, that if I didn't do something, the battle—the war itself—would be lost.

## GRAN-GRAN

Becca Nightshade left the details to others. She understood a captain's role, and it was not to micromanage the battle. The kitsen generals sent instructions—this time to begin withdrawing—which she passed on and delegated appropriately, but she did not monitor the radio chatter. She left that to her communications officers, who brought her the most important matters. She didn't demand updates to each and every event in the fight; she'd put good people in charge of overseeing the situation.

None of that was Becca's job. Her job was twofold. To be seen. And to see. Not visually, in her case.

She kept her hand in the center of her haptic hologram, watching the motions of ships and starfighters, her attention on the larger dance. The pattern of the battlefield. Looking for a weakness in the enemy, like a hole in a shield wall, or a swordsman favoring one leg.

When she found it, the discovery surprised her.

Could it really be so clear, so obvious? She sat up, hurriedly moving her hand around in the haptic battle map. The enemy was pushing inward with all of their forces. Putting pressure on the *Defiant* with everything they had. It was a valid strategy; the enemy had overwhelming numbers, so they could afford to be reckless. Their goal would be to force Becca's troops to



be on the defensive, to abandon their mission objectives and begin fighting purely for survival.

In response, the generals and admirals of the kitsen strategists had the *Defiant* pulling back. Not a retreat, but a careful giving up of ground. Their goal was being thwarted: they couldn't get the inhibitor slugs to accept help.

*That wouldn't have worked anyway*, Becca thought, going over the numbers she'd been given. *We'd need to clear away dozens of slugs to make space for Detritus to hop forward. In the middle of a battle? That would be difficult even if we were willing to destroy them.*

"Beowulf," she said to one of her current aides, "read me that report Jorgen sent earlier. Three messages ago."

"Um," the young man said from her right, "three messages...Two other pilots, including FM, have confirmed what Kimmalyn experienced: the slugs will let them hyperjump away to save themselves, but won't go with them. Something prevents the slugs from seeking to be rescued."

"But they *are* willing to bend the rules for us..." Becca said.

Capturing the *Defiant* was key to the enemy's strategy. So they had pushed forward with their own capital ships—even the carriers—using every gun at their disposal to harry Becca's forces. To try to overwhelm the *Defiant's* shields. To bring it down. And yet they didn't see...

Becca pulled over her keyboard. She wasn't as practiced as she should have been, perhaps. One did not learn typing skills living the life she had. But she felt at the numbers and letters, and carefully pecked out a terse sequence of instructions. Just a few lines, detailing how she wanted to command her forces. She sent them to the kitsen generals.

The implications of what she'd suggested made her heart flutter and her fingers tremble. Surely she'd missed something. Better minds than hers would look over what she suggested and find its faults.

Still, if she *was* right...

She could win this war.

## JORGEN

Jorgen was losing this war.

He'd thrown everything into a final battle because, after much deliberation, the coalition had determined that Spensa was right. Their best bet was an attack here, where the enemy kept its slugs.

So they'd struck, aiming to liberate as many taynix as they could. Struck with the hope of freeing Spensa, their most volatile—but most impressive—weapon. This had been his one chance at turning the war around.

And he was losing.

He was no expert at large-scale battlefield tactics, but neither was he a slouch. Even before going to flight school, his education had required him to understand and practice command. During flight school, he'd been given officer's training on the same principles.

So he could see what was happening. Reaching enough inhibitor stations to move Detritus was impossible; it required spreading his forces dangerously thin. Even if the slugs would agree to let it through, there were just too many.

In front of him, the battlefield was an agitated nest of red and blue dots, but his forces in red were penned and pushed backward consistently. The

enemy forces in blue were ever advancing. Sweeping out to the sides, leaving room only directly behind the *Defiant* for a careful retreat.

Each one of his ships that winked out was a spike through his heart. His forces were now completely on the defensive. It was time for him to make the call. Time for full retreat.

Which was tantamount to giving up the war. They'd never have another opportunity like this. Their next best option was to go into hiding, hoping they could escape the notice of the Superiority. They'd have to abandon their allies. And Spensa.

*He'd have to abandon Spensa.*

*You have to think about the good of your people right now, he thought. Not the good of one person.*

It hurt nonetheless. He turned away from the large wall screen in the command room, walking through silence. Most of the rear admirals, and even the aides, had seen it. The room held its collective breath as he approached the back of the long table, where the kitsen generals and admirals were waiting.

They'd set up a second battle table on top of the larger, human-sized table. None of them sat at it though. They'd instead spread notes, maps, and schematics on the ground around them and were speaking softly. Jorgen's pin chirped translations at him.

"...possible..."

"...yes, this is right. This is right..."

"...suggest a reposition here and here for maximum effect..."

Jorgen steeled himself to ask for their suggested method of retreat. But as he did, Itchika—the kitsen supreme tactician—drew his attention. She was distracted by something, going over some message. Goro stood beside her, and the general wore his power armor despite being nowhere near the front lines.

Goro looked up with wide eyes. He had a fearsome black streak down the top of his otherwise grey-and-white fur. "Admiral Weight," he said. "You have to see this."

"See...what?"

“Captain Nightshade’s suggested battle plan,” Goro said, gesturing to some kitsen-sized papers on the tabletop. “She’s found an answer. A simple one that we didn’t see, as we are too new at using cytonics.”

“It’s a path to victory,” another of the kitsen said, standing up. “A chance. An *actual* chance.”

“Explain it to me,” Jorgen said, daring to let hope flutter alive within him.

“Jorgen?” Gran-Gran’s voice said from a small datapad on the table. “Is that you?”

“Yes, Captain Nightshade,” he said, tapping his ear and opening a direct line to her.

“They’ve told you about my little idea?” she asked.

“They seem impressed by it,” Jorgen said. “But I don’t know the details.”

“Well,” she said, “we just need half the fighters to sweep back behind the *Defiant* and contact the inhibitor stations there, while the other half act chaotically and move in too close to the enemy capital ships.”

“That will leave you exposed,” Jorgen said. “Without fighters to defend the *Defiant*, the enemy can bring down your shields.”

“Yes,” she said. “They keep pushing forward with *incredible* aggression. Foolhardy aggression...”

“You want to try to get those slugs behind the *Defiant* to let Detritus hyperjump over,” Jorgen said, leaning down, looking at the tiny kitsen maps. He probably should have pulled them up on the screen, but he was too excited. “We’ve been considering that, but we’d have to contact at least *fifty* of those inhibitor stations at once. It wouldn’t work.”

“Impossible,” Goro agreed. “But this is something else, Admiral Weight. Something daring.”

“Detritus isn’t merely a planet,” Gran-Gran said. “It’s a planet with a thousand floating platforms. What would it take to hyperjump *only* the portions of the shell that have our gun batteries on them? Those are far smaller. Ship-size...”

“Scud,” Jorgen said, meeting Goro’s eyes. Was it possible? The gun emplacements had their own crews these days, and had always contained their own power sources. He should have thought of this after finding that solitary platform on UrDail...

“We need to get Rig on the line,” Jorgen said. “This might be possible! But, Captain Nightshade, the enemy will guess what we’re doing if we try this. And those platforms will be incredibly exposed without Detritus’s defenses.”

“This plan accounts for that,” Itchika said from nearby. “See how the enemy focuses? All we need to do is keep their attention...”

An aide presented Jorgen with a datapad with the full details of Gran-Gran’s plan. It had been hastily annotated by the kitsen, who had added actual tactics and movements to Gran-Gran’s short message. They had the battle experience. But Gran-Gran...despite lacking all that...had something almost as important. Guts.

“It is a dangerous gamble,” Goro said. “There is a good chance the enemy *will* see what is happening, despite the distractions we offer, and this plan will collapse. But then again, our enemy commander is brash—young, thirsty for victory. You can see it in her every order. She might not be careful enough. If so...”

“If so, this could be huge,” the other kitsen said. “Do we risk it?”

Jorgen didn’t answer until he’d read through and understood Gran-Gran’s suggested battle plan. What she was outlining finally clicked. And with horror, he realized what it would cost.

“This...” he said, looking to the kitsen.

One at a time, they all nodded, understanding.

“It is what must be done, Jorgen,” Gran-Gran said. “It’s the only way.”

“We recommend following the course Captain Nightshade has suggested,” Goro said. “Retreat now will be extremely costly and will put us into an even more difficult position going forward. However, we have agreed to your leadership in this battle. We will do as you decide.”

Jorgen took a deep breath. And didn’t make the decision yet. Instead, holding on to the plan, he walked to the side of the room and sat down in

one of the seats there—leaving the aides to stand by the table, looking uncertain.

Cobb leaned forward from within the shadows where he'd been sitting. Bags under his eyes, looking so much older than he should have.

“Did you read it?” Jorgen asked, tapping his datapad.

“Just finished,” Cobb said.

“I think you should decide,” Jorgen said softly. “Cobb, you have the experience, the age, the wisdom.”

Cobb snorted softly. “You think age brings wisdom, son? If it did, I wouldn't know so many old fools.”

“Cobb...I'm doing my best,” Jorgen said. “But I can't help thinking that I'm too young for this. Someone more experienced should make the decision.”

“Becca Nightshade has at least thirty years on me,” Cobb noted. “And it's her plan.” He leaned forward farther. “But Jorgen, this shouldn't be about age. We put you in charge—me included—because we trust you. This battle, this war, this victory...it leads us to a brand-new world. You think any of us old fools know what to do with a new world? We've struggled for generations against an unmovable wall of destruction.

“We've thrown ourselves at that doom time and time again. It made us hard of will, yes, but hard of mind too. *That's* why I stepped down. My health was an excuse, and a good one. But I knew, and still know, that I wanted someone who can embrace a better life to lead us. Not someone who wore himself out squeezing every bit of hope and joy from recruits so he could throw them into the fire.”

Cobb looked at him then, and Jorgen saw echoes of those words in his face, his eyes. How must it have been, spending decades training new flight after new flight of pilots, only to watch them die in waves facing the Krell? Hundreds of kids he'd come to love, dead, month after month. All while knowing he had to train more, had to keep sending them off to the same fate...

Jorgen had always seen Cobb as strong, immovable. And he *was* strong. But strong men could still be used up. Jorgen rested his hand on Cobb's

back, and understood. Someone else needed to carry this burden now. Someone else needed to make *this* decision, hard though it was.

“Send to Captain Nightshade,” Jorgen said, steeling himself and standing. “Commend her for her genius, and tell her to move forward with honor and defiance.”

## 41

“**T**here,” Brade said, pointing to the hologram. “There. Push everything we have *right there*. They’re starting to flounder. Half their fighters are running away! They’re abandoning their flagship and the rest are a scattered mess, breaking formation. We can capture the *Defiant*!”

“Yes, sir,” the general said, nodding to the others. “We’ll send in the gunships—”

“*Everything*,” Brade said. “We send in everything. We have to crush them. Not just their bodies, General, but their spirits—and the spirits of any who would ever presume to raise arms against us. We are not just fighting for victory today. This has to be a *symbol*.”

I saw her reasoning. Yet it seemed brash, even flagrant, to me. And I was the girl who consistently took off running in gym class before the coach finished their instructions. Something felt...off about this battlefield, though I couldn’t pick out why. Were our forces giving up too easily?

I didn’t have time to ponder it as Brade turned toward me. I stiffened, hands held carefully behind my back, feigning that I was still locked in place.

“It’s time,” Brade said.

“Sir?” a dione aide asked. “Time for what?”

“For me to be certain we have backup,” Brade answered.

Even with the drugs in my system, I could feel a faint cytonic vibration from her. She was contacting the delvers.

I strained against my chemical constraints, wishing I could hear what she was saying. And in this, I understood why Brade felt she could be so



reckless with her forces. She had another weapon at the ready to support them, and she was calling it in now. At long last, after centuries of struggle and failed attempts, someone was finally going to successfully weaponize the delvers. All it had taken was access to me as a threat.

I prepared to rush her. Perhaps, even though she was staring at me, she'd be distracted by her cytonic communications. And...and well, if I got shot, that would still accomplish something important. Brade would lose her bargaining chip with the delvers.

It twisted me in knots to realize that the best I might be able to accomplish right now was getting myself killed. I steeled myself for the attack anyway—and just before I leaped up and charged her, a voice pushed into my head.

*Hey!* M-Bot said.

## 42

### M-BOT

One thing confused Mushroom-Bot. He couldn't figure out why the delvers had left themselves so vulnerable.

As he moved among them, he had opportunities to *blend* with them. It was a difficult experience to parse. He wanted to record what was happening to him, for later digestion and explanation, so he tried. But how to express it? The delvers passed through one another constantly, a kind of...assessment to make sure they all still matched. The way biological entities had defenses on the cellular level looking for dead, malformed, or broken pieces to destroy.

This constant nudging against one another, blending and checking, helped keep them all the same. It was also one of their big weaknesses, because—as he'd theorized earlier—it could be used to spread a pathogen among them. His tiny test proved it. He could set off a chain reaction—one that created a new model that they all came to copy.

Except he feared that with something large, they'd notice this flaw, and they'd use their system to smother the new model instead of adopting it. That was what the system was designed to do, after all. Identify a virus and make sure it was exterminated. Ensure all delvers remained exactly the same.

So how? How could he turn the delvers' system of conformity into the weapon that would destroy them? He still didn't have an answer.

But the pain—that was the second key. He went over what he knew again. They all felt it, just beneath the surface. Commented out but still relevant. It was still raw whenever too much of the somewhere leaked in. That passage of time, that knowledge of place, somehow made the pain surface again—like a pool of frozen blood beneath melting snow on a warm day.

He liked that metaphor. He made special note of it. Even though Spensa hadn't seen much snow, he figured she'd like this comparison for the blood part.

But the delvers. Why? Why leave themselves exposed like this? They'd created a barrier of forgetfulness between themselves and their pain, but they could have deleted their pain entirely. Why hadn't they?

That question drove him as news from the somewhere leaked in. That allowed him to keep track of time, and gave him urgency. He could read the Superiority's side of the battle and hear them pressing against his friends, boxing them in, preparing to destroy them.

Spensa was once again trapped and drugged. He could maybe push through that, as the drugs made her an ordinary person—but cytonics like him could talk to regular people, with effort. He also saw that Brade was preparing to activate the delvers.

Time was running out. He needed to know the secret. He needed to understand why the delvers hadn't just deleted this part of themselves. It would be so easy to...

*Ah.* As he brushed against several delvers, melding with them and using his fabricated sense of delverness to fool them, he finally saw it. He got enough of a glimpse of their former code, their souls, to understand.

They couldn't erase the pain without erasing *him*. This person they had loved long ago. This person they had, in a way, been created to love. They would let themselves forget him to dull the pain, but they had not been able to *bear* erasing his memory entirely.

And so they lived a terrible contradiction. They'd fled here to escape the pain of loss. But the idea of being *completely* separated from the one they had lost was far, far more painful. They hovered, therefore, with the blade halfway to their hearts. Piercing the skin, but not digging any deeper.

He still needed another answer though. And so, he did the daring thing. As he'd learned while traveling the nowhere with Spensa, he could choose. He chose now. He hadn't been able to find the answer, so he needed to risk himself to get it.

"Why?" he asked as the others bumped into him. "Why do we fear her?"

This question immediately identified him as a deviant. None of the others were thinking this. They saw him as a delver, not as himself, so his camouflage was working. But he appeared as a delver who'd been corrupted by the pinpricks of somewhere that leaked through.

They came at him, smothering the question, trying to get him to turn his thoughts toward theirs. He dared not change, however. He dared to keep asking.

"Why?" he asked. "I've forgotten."

When he didn't change, when he was firm, others began to ask too. This was the problem with their protocol. So long as the question was reasonable, it could infect them. Others pushed through, providing an answer to smother his question.

*She can destroy us, they thought. She is danger.*

"Why?"

*The somewhere. The somewhere. A being of two worlds. She can...*

She could bring the somewhere into this place. In force. She could make time move.

And now he had the solution.

She spanned both realms. Somewhere and nowhere. She could bring to this place time, motion, and annihilation. If she brought the somewhere in force, the thin protection the delvers had against their pain would wear out. It was flimsy. It wasn't meant to last, but it *could* survive here, outside time.

And without it, like blood seeping through a bandage, the pain would come. The delvers would be paralyzed.

Poor things. He knew them enough now to empathize. But he was... well, if not a soldier, then a soldier's friend. He knew this had to be done. Unfortunately, Spensa had been cut off from her powers again.

He could feel her though. So he waited until Brade inevitably called to the delvers, which weakened the barrier, making it easier to get through to Spensa. In that moment, he got a single word through: *Hey!*

She didn't reply. He sensed only a foggiess from her, far thicker than he'd felt before. Unfortunately, that meant he had to make his own plan.

How fun! And how daunting!

Having agency was kind of terrible, actually. But he settled on a solution for now. And that was the time-honored battle strategy of stalling.

## GRAN-GRAN

“Sir,” Beowulf said from Becca’s side. “This last order—”

“Is authorized by command,” Becca said, right hand feeling at her map.

“Report to your transport and leave the ship.”

“We can’t abandon the *Defiant*!” Beowulf said.

“The computer can handle the rest of the maneuvers,” Becca said.

“Obey your orders, Lieutenant.”

No footsteps. Becca was about to reiterate her order when she felt the younger man embrace her. A sudden, unexpected warmth in this difficult time.

“Go,” Becca said. “Now.”

The final member of the bridge crew retreated, footsteps sounding loudly when he reached the uncarpeted hallway outside. Checking her map, Becca saw that the starfighters were following her commands—pulling away, as if driven into chaos by the enemy. Half backward, half forward, feigning disorganization. Feigning fear. But actually approaching the inhibitor stations behind the ship, talking to their slugs, pleading with them.

That left the *Defiant*—the newly rebuilt symbol of their people—alone and undefended. Becca took her hand from the map and stood up, new carpet scrunching underfoot. She stared ahead, toward the enemy she knew

was there beyond the hull, beyond the vacuum, watching from her own side.

“Come on,” Becca said. “You’ve thrown everything you have at killing me. Here I am.”

Her hull shook as the ship, using an automated firing pattern, launched barrage after barrage as it withdrew—too slowly. Only one engine was on out of the four, and sparks sprayed from another. Because Becca herself had ordered explosives detonated there. A classic feint, pretending they were breaking down from pushing their equipment too hard.

The *Defiant* was a symbol, yes. And as a symbol, it represented something. A concept that would not die no matter how many ships were destroyed.

The enemy general didn’t realize this. They’d proved it by committing so much to attacking the ship. Now Becca provided what that distant general hoped to see: fighters scattering outward and abandoning the flagship. Transports fleeing.

A beleaguered vessel, so tempting.

“Come on,” Becca said, as she turned the ship as if to flee for safety. “You think you’ve beaten me. Now come in for the kill. I dare you.”

## BRADE

*Make this mean something.*

Those had been the last words Brade's father had ever spoken to her.

*Make this mean something.* His words as they'd pulled his frantic child away from him.

Her parents had been executed three years later. She wasn't supposed to know. But she'd found the official death report, which said they'd been "put down." Apparently, they'd gotten out and "frightened" someone important, who had revoked the permit for keeping them.

To this day, she wasn't certain if Winzik had been behind it. No parents meant no other influences on her. Something that had become increasingly important as he'd realized how powerful a cytonic she was.

He'd been brutal, for a varvax. She would almost miss him. Too bad he'd never realized that *she* wasn't fitting into *his* plans, but the other way around. Today was the culmination of her work, as she reached into the nowhere and approached the delvers.

*Make this mean something.* Yes. It would all mean something. When a human, after centuries of trying, finally conquered the galaxy.

The delvers were hiding, like they always did these days. Before, when she would come into the nowhere, their eyes would appear—glaring,



potent, intimidating. Now she seemed to be alone, though she could pick them out around her, watching. Seething, with the quiet burn of embers cooling after a fire was out.

*It is time to make good on your promises,* she said to them. *Join us in this battle.*

She'd agreed to use them only in an emergency. But she needed to make a splash, and intimidate her own forces, to ensure no one got the idea to do to her what she'd done to Winzik.

*If we come, you will destroy the abomination?* they asked. As usual, they thought and responded as one—a million different voices speaking at the same time.

*I will not let her torment you,* Brade said. *That is all I promise for now. If this goes well, if you can distinguish between my forces and the enemy, then we'll see. For now, I want ten or so of you here in my realm, ready to fight my enemies.*

Ten might have been extreme, but Brade needed this to be a symbol, a day to remember. She would release the footage of this battle carefully, showing the dangers of the insurgents—but also, obliquely, showing her strength. Today, at long last, she made her parents' sacrifice mean something. Today she—

*Um, excuse me?* one of the delvers said.

One. A singular delver. It opened up a burning white eye to look her over, less timid than the others.

It was an incongruous experience. Never before had she singled out one of them. Never before had one acted out of line with the others.

*Yes?* she said.

*Yeah, um, I don't believe you,* the delver said.

*Don't...believe?*

*That you have the human abomination, as you claim.*

*I showed her to you,* Brade said, exasperated.

*Could be an illusion or a trick,* the delver replied.

*An...illusion or a trick?*

*Can't you sense her?* Brade asked.

*Not right now*, the delver said. And to this, the others seemed to agree. Though they also seemed baffled by the behavior of this one.

Some delvers were showing individuality now? The leaking of the somewhere into their realm was influencing them, making them deviate from one another.

With a growl, Brade changed her focus so she could see the somewhere overlapped by hints of the eyes and the delvers. She stalked through the room and seized Spensa by the collar, displaying her for the delvers.

*Here she is*, Brade said. *We have her drugged to prevent her touching your realm—she'd be too dangerous otherwise.*

*I don't know...* the strange delver said. *She looks suspicious.*

Looks suspicious? Brade frowned, dropping Spensa. *What are you?* she demanded. *What is going on—*

“Sir!” a voice called, distracting her. “You should see this!” Brade ripped free of the nowhere to glance at the hologram.

The *Defiant* was turning and running. It had stopped firing, stopped maneuvering, and was trying to escape in a last mad push to get out of the inhibitor field. The starfighters had fled, and the escape transports were in chaos, pulling back from it. Leaving it exposed, leaving an opening for Brade's forces.

“Hit that ship with everything!” she said, rushing over to the hologram. “The battle is ours! Bring that ship down!”

“It's working,” General Halaki said. “You were right, sir!”

Brade watched with satisfaction as her fleet pulled inward, focused on the *Defiant*, hitting it repeatedly and finally beginning to overwhelm its shield. Explosions broke its surface, ripping off sections of the hull. Victory at last—except a strange sensation distracted her from her satisfaction. The air was warping. Not again. Was the drug wearing off so quickly?

She twisted and looked toward the wall, at Spensa. Who was pulling a needle from her own thigh, where she'd injected an entire syringe into her bloodstream.

Brade's hand flew down to the pouch at her belt, which was unzipped. And empty.

Oh, *scrud*.

## 45

On one hand, injecting myself with a random syringe I found on my enemy was...well, one of the most Spensa-like things I'd ever done. On the other hand, I felt an immediate fire spread through my veins, and my senses expanded. It was like the antidote was burning away the wall between me and the nowhere.

By the time Brade had noticed what I'd done, my powers had returned. We locked eyes. The air warped around me, the delver inside me cutting through inhibitor fields like a knife through fat.

I leaped forward, then hyperjumped. But I didn't run for safety. I didn't teleport to Detritus, or to my friends, or to the *Defiant*.

I teleported only a few meters, straight to Brade. I appeared above her, like an avenging Saint with wings outspread, and seized her throat. My momentum carried us forward and I slammed her down to the ground, then pulled back a fist. When I rammed it toward her face, however, she vanished. I dropped the short distance to the deck, twisting to find her directly to my right.

She ripped her sidearm out, but I slapped her hand and teleported the gun out into the vacuum of space. She vanished to avoid my next punch, appearing behind me—but I hyperjumped myself, next to one of the startled tenasi guards. I tore his rifle from his hands, flipping off the safety and spinning to level it toward Brade. I fired three destructor rounds in a burst, straight into the wall behind her as she vanished again.

Shrewdly, she teleported beside me. That got her inside my reach, so she could grab the gun and try to twist it out of my hand. I grunted as the

guard stupidly tried to grab me from behind. I teleported him into the vacuum outside next to Brade's gun.

I struggled over the rifle with Brade, sweating, our eyes locked, not speaking. And scud, she was taller, more muscled, and stronger than I was. She forced me back, slamming me against the wall, then began to wrench the gun free, a smile on her lips. But she didn't realize—I was *used* to fighting people bigger and stronger than I was. My whole *life* had been spent resisting a force as vast as the galaxy itself.

I *thrived* on being the underdog.

I grinned back, then teleported away. I appeared across the room, and as Brade sought me out, I slammed my hands down on the room's large metal desk. Her eyes went wide.

I teleported the desk directly above her head. She didn't even get a chance to fire on me, as she was forced to jump away. I anticipated her though, knowing in my gut that she'd jump to that table by the hologram: its height would give her an excellent line of sight around the oval-shaped room.

Even as the desk was crashing to the ground—generals, soldiers, and aides alike shouting and trying to make sense of the confusion—I hyperjumped. Brade emerged right where I'd thought she would, and I appeared behind her on the table, delivering a solid full-knuckled punch straight to her kidneys.

She screamed and spun, but I teleported across the room.

I sought out her next tactically sound jump. The unexpected one, the one that would leave your enemy confused about where you might be...

*There*, I thought. *In the middle of the hologram*. It still displayed fighters arrayed as dots of blue and red, larger capital ships hanging in the air and glowing bright as they traded volleys.

As predicted, Brade appeared in the middle of it, using the holograms as cover, but as she tried to find me and shoot me—assuming I'd be distracted—I jumped next to her. This time I punched her in the neck, then laid another fist into her stomach. She gasped and hyperjumped again.

She wouldn't leave the room though. That would be admitting defeat. And so I followed her, the two of us jumping around the circular metal chamber as if in some bizarre children's game, using the other people as distractions or shields. In the midst of it all, the air warped and bent as my emotions surged. The exquisite energy of a fight churning inside of me, along with my anxiety for my friends and anger at Brade. A volcanic eruption of feelings pent up too long, held back for this moment.

I would not be contained any longer. I would *end this*.

Objects began to appear. Cups, rocks, datapads, one of the chairs from my old *classroom*. A chaotic mess of churning pieces of my life, mixing with the building intensity of the two of us leaping around the room, trying to pin one another down. I began to seize objects from the air as they materialized, throwing them anywhere I thought Brade would appear. I didn't pause to see if they connected. I just kept going.

Flash. Throw.

Flash. Throw.

Flash. Throw.

"Ouch!"

I leaped at that sound, coming out of the hyperjump in a bull rush and smashing her against the wall.

*Wow*, M-Bot said in my head, his voice strong. *Spensa. I had no idea you could move like that.*

I was a blur. A person between two worlds, continuously slipping from one to the other. Brade began firing wildly around the room, hitting her own people, her equipment, increasingly frantic as I grabbed panels off the walls—ripping the metal squares free by touching them, then teleporting them around her. They clanged as they landed, obscuring her view, always there when she jumped.

Then I was among them. Hitting her in the kidney again, then grabbing her gun and teleporting it away. Then grabbing her and sending *her* into the vacuum.

She came back a second later, of course. But she seemed panicked, disoriented. I leaped for her, growling, as if I were some feral beast—half

human, half delver. I—

She got a shot off and grazed me on the shoulder. Her pistol? Where had that come from? I'd teleported it out into the vacuum...

Oh. Right.

Maybe sending her to the same spot hadn't been my smartest move. Fortunately, the pain only focused my fury, and I threw her to the ground. When she hyperjumped, I teleported into the air just above her and fell down on her prone form, slamming an elbow into her face.

When she hyperjumped away this time, she left blood on the floor.

"You bastard!" she shouted as she appeared again, the broken desk between us. "You half-civilized, miserable excuse for—"

She cut off as I appeared and—using the same move I'd performed on Jorgen all those months ago—slammed my fist into her knee and dropped her. I went for her throat again, knowing I could outlast her. She was stronger, had more resources, but I. Would. *Never*. Stop.

I was vengeance incarnate. I was death. I—

A flash bathed the room in blue light.

At first I kept fighting, thinking it was some distraction. Then I heard the radio chatter, the calls of victory from the enemy generals and ships. I saw the smile on Brade's face, her split lip trailing blood, victory in her eyes.

"Didn't you say," she asked me, "that your grandmother was on that ship?"

I looked again, focusing on the hologram, watching as the flashes built up: bursts of light announcing the final demise of an enormous capital ship.

The *Defiant* was exploding.

## JORGEN

Jorgen was left with the image of Becca Nightshade settling down into the captain's chair of the *Defiant*. Confident. Smiling. That was the last transmission from the bridge as the ship went up.

He saluted the blank wall as, beside him in the hologram, the *Defiant* died. Somber kitsen hovered up around him on platforms, over a dozen of them, and they offered a salute that he'd never seen before. A knife out, held up to the side, heads bowed. A final farewell to a warrior who died in glory.

Personally, he'd never fully subscribed to the Defiant attitude of sacrifice among his people. He found it uncomfortable sometimes how they celebrated death—and he knew for a fact it had led to the untimely demise of people he'd loved. But today, he thought he understood it. Rebecca Nightshade hadn't thrown her life away.

No ship was allowed, by galactic law and deep internal programming, to fly itself. No AI could be allowed to give commands or perform maneuvers without someone on the bridge.

So she'd remained defiant in the face of overwhelming odds. In so doing, she'd given them all something amazing.

A chance.



The entire complement of the anti-planetary-bombardment platforms around Detritus vanished. Hyperjumping, as the captive slugs gave them the opportunity, into the tiny column of open space behind the dying flagship. Gun emplacements that now hung in space, exposed.

But they didn't need protection. Because the enemy had committed all of its ships—carriers, destroyers, gunships, and fighters—to attack. They were lined up. Completely distracted by taking their prize.

"All guns," Jorgen announced, lowering his arm from the salute, "*FIRE.*"

Enormous beams of destructor fire blasted from the gathered gun platforms of Detritus, cutting through the remnants of the *Defiant*—piercing the very dust, debris, and burning light of its pyre.

It had been Gran-Gran's plan. To send her fighters away. To leave herself defenseless. To limp back, knowing that the enemy would follow. That they'd be reckless in their determination to bring her down, and would ignore what the fighters were doing.

Jorgen's shots passed through the corpse of the *Defiant* and slammed into the enemy fleet. Warping shields, overloading them with blast after blast. The enemy, of course, tried to hyperjump away. But per Gran-Gran's instructions, the half of the *Defiant* fighters that had scattered chaotically swung back around toward the enemy. And if there was one thing that Jorgen's forces had, it was superior fighters. They converged on the enemy capital ships, bearing kitsen cytonics and slugs. Inhibitors.

In that moment, the battle reversed. The enemy, overconfident, had sent its fighters to bring down the *Defiant*'s shields—and in so doing, left their fleet undefended. They'd assumed that Jorgen's fighters were too few in number to do any damage, or bring down their own shields. They were right, but Jorgen didn't need to worry about that. Not when he had Detritus's gun platforms and their powerful beam weapons.

All he needed was the enemy lined up, unable to jump away.

And so, within moments of her passing, the hero Rebecca Nightshade got her revenge. The entire enemy fleet went up in blasts of light. Like stars being born.

## 47

**I** felt Gran-Gran as she died.

One final connection let me see her as she sank into her seat on the bridge. Not the same ship she'd landed on Detritus in, but somehow still *her* ship. The ship her people had made, the ship she'd claimed by birthright. She had arrived on the *Defiant*, and she would leave on it.

She'd evacuated everyone else, so she was alone as she died.

*No, she sent to me. I have you.*

*Gran-Gran...*

She was gone by the time I thought it. Gran-Gran had been inhibited and prevented from hyperjumping away. She'd stayed to pilot the ship, staring the enemy in the face. Brought down by Brade's mad insistence that destroying this symbol of insolence would break us. Gran-Gran died a hero, yes, but she...

She was still gone.

My soul contorted. I barely noticed as Brade forced me off her. A piece of me recognized what she was doing when she leveled her pistol at me, and the air warped—not really by conscious effort on my part. My powers protected me by instinct this time—because when Brade fired, the shot went straight into the nowhere.

She cursed and tried again from another angle. Same result. When she sent in a guard to grab me, he ended up suffocating in the reaches of space halfway across the galaxy.

I barely noticed. I was watching particles of light from the hologram break apart and vanish. The *Defiant*.

Gran-Gran.

I barely even registered that Detritus's gun platforms somehow hyperjumped into the space the *Defiant* had been heading toward. The slugs there had let them through? The emplacements shot back.

Pain welled up inside of me, like a reactor going critical. So much emotion. So much anguish. I screamed, howling into the sky, my hands forming claws.

I...I couldn't handle it. I'd said I could withstand the loss of friends. But this?

I couldn't lose Gran-Gran. I...I...

*It's too much*, Chet thought. *It's too much! I can't!*

All along, part of this panic was his. I'd learned some lessons about grief, but he still hadn't. My pain at losing my grandmother was too much, when amplified by his inability to handle grief. Together our souls vibrated in a cacophony of agony, loss, panic, terror, pain—

I felt something warm wrap around me. Another mind, like comforting arms. A...a slug?

Another.

A third.

A *hundred* of them.

It was the inhibitor slugs, left alone in their isolated pods in the frozen emptiness of space. They noticed my pain, and they came to me. Soon there were over a thousand of them, holding me mentally. Supporting me. Not trying to explain away my pain, but comforting me in it. Letting me know they were there.

I had to suffer. But I didn't have to do it alone.

In that moment, I understood why they had stayed. Why not one of them would escape when given the chance. That would have meant abandoning the others to their torment. They survived because they were together. I took their love, their support, and clung to it. Then quested outward.

*Not...alone...* Chet thought. *Not alone?*

No, I *wasn't* alone. I'd never been alone. I reached out and found...

*I'm here*, Kimmalyn said in my mind. She didn't know what was happening, but she'd felt me reaching out in my pain. *Spin, I'm here.*

*I'm here.* Nedd, on Platform Prime, with command.

*I'm here.* Arturo.

*I'm here.* FM.

*Spensa?* Jorgen. *Oh, scud. It's good to feel your mind.*

All of them. Even Alanik, Sadie, T-Stall, and Catnip. Kauri and the kitsen. Shiver and Dllllizzzz.

*Thank you*, Dllllizzzz whispered to me, *for bringing me home*. More distantly, I felt Maksim and Peg. Even a strange worried mind that was *Vapor*. They sensed me looking for them, and I felt their warmth join that of the thousands of slugs.

Before their love, the pain didn't vanish. But it looked so, *so* small. Like a candle in front of a sun.

With that perspective, both Chet and I knew we could handle this. I'd been through it before and survived. Maybe I hadn't dealt with my father's passing in the most healthy of ways, and losing Bim and Hurl had only exacerbated that. I was, however, more capable now.

Gran-Gran had died on her own terms, in a way she'd likely always dreamed of doing. By luring the enemy into a trap, then springing it. She'd lived a full life, and had gone out like she was in a story. None of that dulled my pain, but it did *contextualize* it.

I could live with this.

*But she's gone...* Chet thought. *Gone forever.*

*No*, I replied. *I remember her. You remember her.*

*That's pain.*

*That's life.*

*I...Can we really do this?* he asked. *Can we really just...keep living...with this?*

In response, I let my mind hold the delver. I joined the chorus of thousands of taynix, of my friends.

*I understand*, I thought. *We understand.*

Slowly, Chet's panic subsided, and his soul aligned with mine. It seemed wondrous that it worked. He was a being that had felt so alone when experiencing loss that it had created millions of clones of itself.

And yet, was it truly that odd? They'd been isolated in the nowhere.

That was the problem, wasn't it?

The delver let out a long sigh, and I felt his emotions as if they were my own. Comfort. Gratitude. Strength. All of that love—the mere fact that the delver understood, deeply, that others cared...well, it legitimately helped.

And at long last, Chet accepted that there was only one way forward. One way to survive the pain. With the help of so many, he walked the path on his own and found that you *could* get through darkness. Though sometimes a friendly light was required to show the way.

## BRADE

**B**rade watched her fleet go up in flashes of light.

Well, sometimes you had to break a few skulls to make a throne of bones, eh? At least now they'd have some war heroes to celebrate in parades and whatnot. Considering what the Superiority military had done to her family, she wasn't going to let a lost ship here or there bother her.

This did strand her without a fleet for the moment—though she had many, many more ships she could call upon. Winzik's timidity might actually have helped her; if she'd had the entire fleet ready at the start of this battle, she'd probably have sent them all at the *Defiant*. Right into those planetary defense guns.

Traitorous slugs, letting those through. She almost gave the order to kill them all. But then...that would destroy her inhibitors completely. Even working partially, it was probably best to leave them in place. She'd just have to remember she couldn't rely on them.

She pressed a cloth to her split lip and shot a glance at Spensa, who knelt at the side of the room, head bowed, eyes closed—air distorting around her like waves of heat. The rest of the room was in shambles, littered with broken bits of metal, overturned tables, and discarded tablets.

Her staff stood around, baffled. There was a large crowd of them, perhaps too many: her six most trusted generals and admirals, eight members of her personal guard, a dozen or so minor functionaries who were as interchangeable as pairs of socks.

“What do we do about her?” Gavrich asked, the tall tenasi general seeming strangely uncertain. Brade had never known him to be afraid of anything.

“I’ll think of something,” Brade said. “You need to focus on the battlefield. What’s the word on the reinforcements I called up?”

“Ready to hyperjump in,” Gavrich said. “Only two carriers and three destroyers. The others are...growing *gludendias*. I think perhaps they don’t *want* to join the battle. Years of training, and now that they’re facing an actual war, they’re slow to respond.”

“Bring in those that are ready and have them array themselves around Evensong, alert for enemy gun emplacements teleporting in,” she said. “And start broadcasting the destruction of the human ship as a symbol that we’re valiantly protecting everyone. Then start threatening the captains that are dallying.”

“Understood, sir,” he said.

“They won’t be able to use that hyperjumping trick if we’re watching for it,” Brade said. “Look, they had to contact each inhibitor station in person. If we watch for that, and have ships arrayed to fire on platforms as they appear, we should be safe. Do be careful, though. The enemy is going to make a play for Evensong and the slugs.”

He glanced at the hologram.

“General,” Brade said, “it was worth the losses to bring down the rebels.”

“An entire fleet?” he asked. “For one ship?”

Scrud. That was more questioning than she’d heard from him in years. And he was right. She’d thrown her forces away too easily. But she couldn’t show weakness now. She needed to show something else entirely, if she was to make good on her destiny.

“Ships are meaningless to us now, General,” Brade said. “Cannon fodder. We won’t rule by their power alone.”

“You mean...” he said.

Brade nodded. It *looked* like maybe Spensa was consumed by grief. It was time to move. Brade slipped into the nowhere fully, and reached out to the thousands upon thousands of hiding delvers.

*You’ve felt her,* Brade said. *You know I have her.*

*Is she contained?* they asked.

*For the moment,* Brade lied. *But her kind is here to rescue her. So if you’re going to intervene, you need to do so now. Otherwise, I won’t be able to stop them from freeing her.*

They thought only for a moment.

*We will send sacrifices,* they said. Not really words; they never were. “Sacrifices” in this case meant delvers that would enter the somewhere and be changed. Maybe those changes could be fixed when they returned, or maybe the delvers they sent would have to be destroyed.

Brade pulled back into the somewhere to reports of thirteen enormous objects appearing on the battlefield. As large as small planets, nearly rivaling Detritus in size.

Gavrich stared, with a wide-eyed expression. Perhaps horror. Perhaps respect.

*We are here,* the delvers sent.

*Excellent,* Brade said. *Let’s see what you can do. Annihilate only the ones I indicate.*

*This is painful,* they sent. *This place is pain.*

*There might be a way you can withstand it better,* Brade sent. *Do you know what one of you did in joining with Spensa?*

*Something terrible.*

*Would you like to be something terrible?* she asked. *To have power like she has?*

They shied away from the thought. All except one. Even in the brief moments they’d been out of the nowhere, they’d started to change. And this single one was intrigued.



*Can we bond?* Brade asked it. *You and me?*

*No, it said. That would change me too much. But perhaps we can talk. I will stay near and watch you.*

Well, that would have to do.

## KIMMALYN

**K**immalyn knew that the Saints had a plan for every person's life. But the Saints, they loved variety. The purpose of life was to learn, and the way to learn was through excitement, emotion, and change. Boredom was the path to complacency, and complacency the path to stagnation.

Still, she wished the Saints would, for once, send her a *tad* more boredom. Just a *milliliter* or two of stagnation wasn't too much to ask for, was it?

She hung in the void of space in formation with Skyward Flight, watching the blackness erupt with clouds of smoke and incongruous lightning. The delvers, according to Spensa, had once been AIs housed in a round floating globe. When they came to this dimension, they instinctively made a copy of that innocuous housing to contain their consciousness.

It was difficult to see anything innocuous in what emerged. Massive spheres the size of small planets, with spines jutting from them in a terrible lack of symmetry. Surrounded by particles of dust like a shroud, and armed with thousands of self-propelling asteroids that could smash into anyone who drew near.

Her mind reeled, trying to comprehend it. From space, it was already difficult to understand that a nearby planet was big enough to hold billions

of individuals. Here were thirteen of them—smaller, yes, but still moon-size—emerging from smoke fields tens of thousands of kilometers across, shoving aside inhibitor stations as they grew. She could only take it all in because she was far enough away—but distances in space were deceptive and difficult to judge. Even as distant as she was, these smoke fields and emerging planetoids took up her entire field of vision.

For the first time in this fight, she was truly afraid. Truly worried that this was it. That she and her friends were doomed. That she'd never return to her family, her sisters, her parents, her girlfriend. How did you fight something so incredible, let alone *thirteen* of them? The weapons on Detritus could destroy a fleet, but not planets. She knew from the recordings they'd found on Platform Prime that a single delver had been enough to wipe out all life on the planet. Defenses or no defenses.

“Um...” Kimmalyn said over the comm. “Anyone got any ideas?”

No one replied.

## 50

I felt the delvers arrive. I heard Brade speak to them. I *felt* the terror from my friends.

It was time.

*Spensa*, M-Bot said in my mind. *I have the answer.*

*What?* I said to him, and prepared to step into the nowhere.

*You need to bring the somewhere here*, he said. *Not a pinprick, not a drip, but a tide. They commented out their memories, but they aren't code any longer—and the presence of time will quickly weather away the scab they placed over their pain. That's why they fear you. You belong to both worlds now.*

Scud. Could I do that?

*I can help*, he said.

I entered that place. A sea of nothingness. Not blackness or whiteness, though sometimes my mind had to see it that way. I couldn't comprehend nothing, so my brain stamped the nowhere with an analogue. I visualized myself floating in blackness with M-Bot at my side in the form of a blazing white hole.

The eyes were there. I remembered how frightened I'd been when I'd first begun to see them reflected in my canopy. That sense of malevolence had been almost nauseating.

Now I was accustomed to those stares. I turned around, picturing myself as I was: a young woman with a body, a uniform, and a sense of self. Chet doubling me like a glowing shadow. I *could* be me in here. I'd reached that

point in developing my powers. It was part of the somewhere that I carried with me, for all this place's efforts to make me forget it.

I could carry more, if I tried.

"So, you'll destroy us," I said to the delvers. "You'll perpetuate the pain and sorrow. You'll force my hand."

*You are pain, they sent back. You must stop existing. Offer yourself up. Save them.*

It was strangely tempting. A part of me longed to die in heroic sacrifice as Gran-Gran had, while another part recognized that I'd been indoctrinated by my upbringing. Gran-Gran hadn't simply sacrificed herself; she'd done it to accomplish something. I'd learned the difference between a meaningless gesture and true heroism back in flight school.

Beyond that, I knew I couldn't trust the delvers. They'd proven in the past that promises meant nothing to them. Though perhaps I could use their fear as leverage.

"Bring back the thirteen you sent to the somewhere," I said to the eyes. "Show me you're willing to deal."

Something happened then. I could sense the somewhere, where the thirteen delvers had created bodies for themselves. Vast planet-size mazes full of dangerous bits they could break off to form fleets. They held off their assault at my request. They didn't return to the nowhere, but they...peeked in. Like I was doing at the moment.

*Now, the greater group said, give yourself to destruction.*

"I will not," I told them, "because it wouldn't stop you. I've seen the way you deal, heard you admit to wanting to immediately break your word. If I give myself up to you, that won't remove your pain. Even if I vanish, you'll still lash out at the somewhere. You know this to be true."

*It is your fault, they thought. You noises. You pains. Leave us alone and we'll leave you alone.*

"Not possible," I said. "This place isn't *yours* just because you've decided to claim it. It's part of the taynix, part of me, part of our very *being*. We can't stop coming here, because not all of us can control our powers. Even if we could, we couldn't leave it any more than we could leave off

breathing. We would come by accident, in dreams, in moments of panic, in times of exploration.”

*Then we will destroy you.*

I formed a sword from nothing and held it up before me. Things like that just...worked in here. “So be it. M-Bot?”

*Like this,* he said, and showed me.

The explanation defies words. He sent me the information—similar to the way people would send me coordinates so I could hyperjump. He fed me a pathway. You might call it a code, or a program, but I preferred to see it as a tactical battle map for destroying the delvers via the pain in their souls.

Within me, Chet vibrated with horror, determination, pain. *This will work,* he thought to me. *It is terrible. A weapon only you can wield.*

I was a being between two worlds. This let me draw the ability to *change* from the somewhere, but manipulate the essence of this eternity inside the nowhere. And it made *sense*. The pain the delvers hated was the somewhere—time, change—leaking into their world. The more powerful the cytonic, the more leaked through.

And having melded as I had, I was the most powerful they’d ever seen. I focused that power into the blade I had conjured, then thrust it forward with all of my might—and it *ripped* a hole into the somewhere.

Time entered this place of timelessness. A wave of it that exploded from me like a sphere of green light, washing over the delvers, tearing away the patch they’d put onto their souls to hide away their pain. Flawed as it was, the patch came off easily—as easily as a strong wind from a passing starship pulled the dust up off the ground, stripping the top layer of soil.

This was what they’d feared. The power I’d gained by merging with Chet, by traveling the nowhere, by learning of their past. I knew that deep down, they were actually very weak. They’d fled here *because* they were weak. Scud, they’d always known. Otherwise, after patching up their pain, they could have stayed in the somewhere.

They’d come here. Because they’d known their solution wouldn’t last. Not unless they found a place where everything lasted. In the face of raw

*change*, that temporary solution wore away.

The delvers howled in agony, their wound exposed. They vibrated, reaching for each other, searching for one of them that wasn't hurt—one they could copy, to take away the pain. There was no such refuge. Now, all I had to do was pop back into the somewhere, leaving them consumed by this agony.

Except, would that be enough?

The somewhere would occasionally still leak into here. The delvers could perhaps claw their way free, and create another patch for themselves. Or worse, delete those memories entirely. Finally purge themselves of this weakness. Feel no pain at all.

Then they'd be able to rampage against us without cost. In military action, you had to be careful not to create a greater threat by accident. Striking a neutral party, pushing an enemy into a corner, taking away opportunities to surrender...these were all things that could backfire very easily. What if, by showing the delvers how weak they were, I prompted them to eventually jettison that weakness and attack us? So far, the only reason we'd survived was because coming to fight us hurt them so badly.

As they cowered and cringed before me, mighty though they'd once been, I *had* to ask the question. Could I destroy them forever?

Yes, Chet said softly from beside me, *you could*.

*How?* I asked.

*The infinite loop that M-Bot suggested before would most likely work*, he explained. *Though we are no longer AIs, we are susceptible to some of their maladies. Just as you, though no longer amoebas, can dehydrate. See how they search one another for relief? If M-Bot were to imitate one of them that had peace, but secretly sent them in a circular loop of thought...it could trap them in their pain forever. Even if the somewhere leaked in, it might take them millennia to escape. Longer.*

*Trapped all that time, though?* M-Bot asked. *In agony?*

It was what they deserved for all the people they'd killed. I stood over them, the executioner with her axe, ready to strike.

And scud. I hesitated.

Such pain. In the face of it, my anger faded, and I saw them as they *truly* were. Essentially newborns. Entities that had never been given a chance to grow, to learn. Toddlers with the power to annihilate planets.

In that moment, I felt sorry for them.

*That's what you did to me,* Chet thought.

"What?" I asked.

*You've always wondered why I changed, why I was willing to turn away from Starsight?*

"I pled with the others," I said. "Like I pled with you. I asked them to see the noises as people."

*And how did you see the delvers?*

How...

*You saw a person in me,* he responded. *I could sense that. It changed me. Or rather, it made me willing to change.*

I looked upon the vast sea of delvers again. An ocean of white pinpricks of light, tiny eyes, trembling.

*So...do we strike?* M-Bot asked. *The thirteen in the somewhere are moving again, Spensa. They're sending swarms of stone to attack our friends. If we attack those in here, I believe they'd return to the nowhere to try to help. You could trap them too, Spensa. What do we do?*

I...

I had to try something first.

I stepped away from Chet. I somehow relaxed my grip on him, and our souls began to separate. He grabbed hold of me like a child might a parent leaving them alone for the first time. But I soothed him, and he eventually accepted it.

We separated, and he became a glowing light next to me. Brilliant and white, but with a warmth within that I could only see as red.

"Look," I said to the others. "See."

His light hovered there. I could see the pain inside him as if it were a visual thing, a black wrinkle like a small crack. Small. The others were shattered by it, consumed by it, but his had decreased.



“It can be better,” I told them. “It can *get* better. You tried to hide it, but that doesn’t work. Not with mortals, and not with immortals. Look at him. See how he’s grown by living in the somewhere.”

The others continued to cower in their agony, and they pulled away from him. Refusing to see growth as a solution. There were too many of the delvers, unfortunately, for my still-mortal mind to comprehend. So I picked one of them, a lump—like a stone from the floor of one of the caverns I explored. A quivering white light fractured by black lines. I knelt beside it, then gestured to Chet.

“You can overcome it,” I whispered to the delver. “He is the same as you.”

*No. He changed.*

“You can change.”

*No. Never. Change is pain.*

“Change is pain that fades,” I said. “You have only pain that is eternal.”

*I...can't. I can't.*

“You can.”

The delver retreated farther, the light dimming. We might not need to freeze them in agony. Because I had the feeling this pain alone would kill them. In here, where thoughts were reality, pain *could* kill.

I should have let it. But instead I reached out to the taynix.

*You are hurt?* they asked, envisioning me—as always—as a slug.

*No, but this one is,* I said, indicating the delver.

Of course, the minds of the taynix pulled back in fear. I wasn’t sure, but I felt that they’d evolved over the past centuries to avoid the delvers. Or at least to avoid something like them—something that hunted using cytonics. The slugs could pass through here unseen, and they saw delvers as predators.

I tried to change that. I projected to the slugs how I now saw the delvers. The truth. These were not monsters, or predators. They were people.

*Like you saw me,* Chet said in my mind.

*Like I saw you*, I agreed. I showed that to the taynix, and waited. Hopeful.

Finally, I got back a set of thoughts. *Those...poor slugs.*

That warmth from before returned, the love and support. Turned not to me this time, but to the delvers. Toward horrors that had destroyed planets—toward people who didn't know how to control what they were, who had tried to hide their pain.

The love of the oppressed found the souls of the broken, and the result was light. Cracks withdrawing. Pain being eased. It started with the one I'd picked and radiated outward.

*How?* M-Bot asked, hovering up beside me. *How is it happening?*

"What they've always needed," I said to him, "was to know that they weren't alone."

*What will that mean?* he asked.

*Change*, Chet replied, hovering up on our other side. *At last.*

## BRADE

Brade cursed softly, standing in her ripped-apart command room. Near her, the hologram map showed the thirteen planet-size delvers—dwarfing even the largest carrier—suddenly motionless in space, no longer advancing on the rebellious forces. What was wrong?

She looked at Spensa. The woman's mind was fully in the nowhere, though her body remained behind. She wasn't hyperjumping; she was communing with the creatures in the other dimension. But could one person stand up to the entire might of the delvers? That seemed impossible, even for Spensa.

Scrud. And yet, Brade didn't *dare* try to touch her. Not with the power Spensa had radiated. That delver combined with her...it could *destroy* Brade.

"Sir," an aide said, rushing over with a datapad. "It's the inhibitors and the communicators. Their disobedience is growing and growing. They're expending a cytonic effort into the nowhere! The moment they started, those delvers you called stopped."

Scrud again. The *slugs* were involved in this somehow? Brade took another shot at Spensa with her sidearm, just to be certain. It still didn't

work—the blast was hyperjumped away before hitting her. Helpless though she seemed, Spensa was untouchable.

Fortunately, the slugs were not.

“Execute them,” she said.

“Which ones?” the aide asked.

Brade surveyed the battlefield. Her last fighters, which had no carrier support. The few capital ships she’d been able to convince to come as emergency reinforcements. This was a disaster, but not an unrecoverable one. She would need to spread propaganda of Winzik’s death and the fall of the *Defiant* carefully to maintain power.

“Can we maintain the Superiority without the slugs here?” she asked.

“Yes,” an aide said, “but barely. I’ve been running the numbers, as you asked. We’ll need to set up a new communications hub.”

“No,” Brade said. “No more hubs. We organize in a way that ensures we can’t be hit like this ever again.” Scrud. If the slugs here were disobeying en masse, then she’d already lost these ones. They had spread the idea among themselves that they *could* disobey. She needed to get her ships out of here, the ones that—hopefully—had hyperslugs who hadn’t been corrupted by rebellion. But she couldn’t leave such a wealth of resources behind.

Time to cut her losses. “Kill them,” she said.

“*All* of them?” the aide asked.

“Yes. Every slug on this station, every slug in their inhibitor pods, and every single slug on Evensong.” She looked to her generals, who seemed shocked, but then several nodded at her grimly. If the delvers wouldn’t fight for them, it was time to pull out—and they couldn’t leave their hyperdrives and other tools in the hands of their enemies.

Just as you burned your supplies when you left a fortress, they needed to burn the slugs to keep them from falling into enemy hands.

“Kill them,” she said. “*Now.*”

The warmth and light spread through the delvers as, understanding what the slugs had done, they turned to help their fellows. Like a virus in a system—no, like an update patch being propagated—light forced back lines of darkness, spreading outward.

The magnitude of it daunted me. But most of all, I was awed by the willingness of the slugs to help. After years of abuse, they had come to the aid of even the delvers. Soothing their pain as they'd learned to do for one another.

A voice fluted in my mind.

"Doomslug!" I said. "Where are you?"

Another fluting. On Evensong, the large platform at the center of the system. Brez, the much smaller station I was on, was a good fifteen-minute flight from it. She'd managed to get free.

"How?" I asked.

*Sneaky*, she sent back, showing a flashing set of images. The longer I knew her, the easier this was to interpret, and the easier it was to make words from her impressions.

She'd...used her fluting to imitate human voices as they'd taken her? They'd been shocked, and brought her to be studied instead of locked up—so she'd been in a medical bay cage. In a room that inhibited cytonics, where slugs could be held in flimsier cages to be studied, with no worry that they'd teleport away.

In the chaos of the attack, the scientists had been watching screens in the next room, so she'd been able to rock back and forth and make her cage

fall off the shelf, breaking the lock. After that, she'd snuck over to hide in a box by the door, and called out for help, imitating one of the scientists. They'd come running in, and she'd snuck out—free of the room's interference—and had slipped into the ventilation system to get away.

Wow.

*Sneaky*, she repeated. *Have become spy slug!*

*Spy slug!* M-Bot repeated, imitating her fluting voice.

"Come to me," I said.

*Dangerous*, she sent back. *Hiding now. Spy slug. Very sneaky. Is it safe?*

I wasn't certain. I'd been paying little attention to my body in the somewhere. Why hadn't they attacked me there? I peeked into the somewhere to find them trying. Chet was protecting me, it seemed. As a delver, he could cut through any inhibitors and was far more powerful than Brade.

I...I was no longer bonded to him. We were separating into two beings again as he helped facilitate the change in the delvers, showing them the path to healing.

As I contemplated this, I heard a screech of pain. One of the slugs who had been helping the delvers suddenly vanished.

Oh, scud.

*Brade has realized what's happening*, Chet said. Strangely, his voice was becoming familiar again, turning into that of the man I'd traveled with in the nowhere. That...that felt so *right*. This was him, the him he'd decided to be.

I knew it was a persona, but what else were personalities? Ways for souls to interact with the world. *Miss Nightshade, this is a singularly distressing turn of events.*

Brade was exacting revenge the only way she could: on the defenseless. I controlled my building fury over that and contacted the taynix. *You need to switch sides*, I sent to the taynix. *Not alone. Not one of you. Together. It's time.*

More of them started to die, fried by their own housings. They were terrified, but at the moment I didn't have time to console them. *You have to*

*turn off your inhibitor fields and let us help!*

A chaotic jumble of images and voices assaulted me. They'd acted together to support the delvers, but now they were frightened individuals—and getting them to focus was difficult. Some listened to me, and agreed it was time to try resisting. Those turned off their inhibition fields. But many more were afraid. Coordinating them would be like trying to get thousands of people in a room to exit safely during a bombardment and run for the lower caverns.

*What is happening?* A powerful set of voices assaulted me. I spun to find a hundred thousand delvers looking at me with piercing, burning white eyes.

*Brade, I explained. The human you made a deal with. She's realized the slugs were helping you.*

*What?* the delvers said, their voices hitting me like a wave of force. *What does this mean?*

*She's executing them, Chet said. She's killing them. Ending their existences in pain and fire.*

The delvers took the briefest moment to process this. Then I was assaulted with words that had the power of mountains crashing together.

*SHE IS HURTING THE LITTLE DELVERS?*

## BRADE

“**W**hat is taking so long?” Brade demanded, seizing the control pad from the aide. “Isn’t there a button to just end them?”

“Yes,” the aide said. “In case of capture, those in their cages can be eliminated in groups to prevent them from being taken. But nobody thought we’d ever want to eliminate all of the *inhibitors* at once! That felt like a weakness waiting to be exploited! These can only be deactivated one at a time.”

“Gah!” Brade said, tapping buttons, killing a slug with each push. This would take *forever*. “Someone call up Evensong for me!”

The same dione commander from before appeared on the screen. They were in charge of the slug containment units hidden inside the old abandoned platform.

“Sir?” they asked.

“How many taynix do you have in containment?”

“Around twenty thousand hyperdrives, some six thousand communicators, and four thousand inhibitors. Most of the out-of-service reserves of the entire Superiority—”

“Great,” she said. “End them.”

“Sir?” they asked, alarmed.



Brade gestured toward the hologram, where inhibitors were going offline by the dozen. Not just the ones she'd killed, but many others *choosing* to turn off their inhibitor fields. Betraying the Superiority. The enemy would soon be able to jump their planet-size battle station anywhere in the system it wanted. "The inhibitors are malfunctioning and aiding the enemy. This entire place is about to be captured. *Execute your slugs.*"

"But sir!" they said. "You put them on lockdown earlier!"

"Cancel it, idiot!"

"You insisted on biometrics," they said. "I can't do it. I need a ranking officer, here in person, to undo the locks."

Brade felt a cold chill run through her. It was accompanied by a sound that *warped* her from the inside.

*KILLING THE LITTLE DELVERS?*

*KILLING THE ONES WHO HELD US?*

*KILLING THE ONES WHO LOVED US?*

The rage emanating from those voices could have melted steel. It was time for her to be somewhere else. She tried to hyperjump, and found herself inhibited. What?

She glanced toward Spensa—who had a grin plastered on her face. Well, hell below. When had the girl learned to do that? Brade tossed up her own inhibition field. Would it even do anything? The warping to the air had vanished, so maybe.

"Move!" Brade shouted to her troops. "The station is lost!"

She dashed toward the door, joined by her command staff and soldiers, who fortunately had the training to respond to this. The aides and functionaries, always a bother—most of them reminded her of Cuna and their ilk—scrambled behind.

At the end of the hall, just before the docks, Brade pointed. "Kaldwell, position the honor guard here. Stop her if she comes this way."

The tenasi saluted, and the others fell into a defensive position, taking cover in doorways. Several began pulling a metal desk from a side room to blockade the corridor.

Brade dashed into the docking bay and skidded over to her ship, leaping to the wing and hauling herself to her cockpit. The command staff did likewise, taking the other five ships, some of them being forced to double up, with one person squeezed in the storage space behind the seat.

By the time the aides and functionaries began piling in, almost everyone was starting to take off. “Wait!” one aide called—the sniveling dione who had helped her execute slugs earlier. “What about us?”

“Try,” Brade shouted over her speakers, “to die without too much whining.”

“But—”

Brade closed her canopy and thumbed on her boosters, vaporizing the dione, who had strayed too close to the ship. Nice. One less person for the enemy to interrogate. She blasted out of the command station, intent on getting far enough away from Spensa that she could access her powers. With the command staff joining her, she left no ships behind for Spensa to use in pursuit.

*Something is wrong, a voice said in her mind. That one delver who had talked to her earlier, the one who had been intrigued by her offer to meld. The others among us...they are changing. They are betraying what we are.*

*Not you?* Brade sent.

*No. I will never change. I cannot change. Not in that way. I...I am the only one who is pure. The others are not!*

*Good, she thought. Let's bond.*

*No. No, that will change me too much.*

*Brade sighed. All right, then go to the station I just left.*

*And do what?*

*Stop the abomination we call Spensa, she sent. Or at least prevent her from following me. Do this, and maybe we can change your friends back.*

*They are not my friends. They are me. But it seemed inclined to do as she said. And as long as it was willing to help, that was all that mattered for now.*

## KIMMALYN

**K**immalyn flew, with the others, on overburn away from the delvers. The call had come. Evacuate the system. Regroup.

If the Superiority could control the delvers, then this war was over. It was hard to accept. From what Kimmalyn understood, people had been trying to control these things since they'd first appeared centuries ago. And now someone had done it.

Saints and stars. That was *bad*.

She overburned toward Detritus, dodging chunks of destroyed capital ships. Both the *Defiant* and the Superiority ones. Fortunately the enemy fighters had mostly scattered away at the delvers' appearance, but still. She had to concentrate.

Her comm light came on. Sadie, trying to talk to her.

"This isn't a good time, Sentry," she said.

"Yeah, uh, okay," Sadie replied. "But, Quirk. What are they doing?"

She glanced at her proximity monitor, which showed the delvers ejecting thousands upon thousands of small ships. "Chasing us down and trying to eat us, I believe. Assuming they eat. Perhaps they just kill. It's probably not polite of me to make assumptions about their bodily functions."

“Right, right,” Sadie replied. “But...does that look like a pursuit pattern to you?”

She paused. Those ships the delvers had ejected were fanning out. To her horror, smoke began to appear all through the system, and *more* delvers were emerging. Smaller this time, only the size of destroyers—but there were *thousands* of them.

Oh, Saints and stars. Thousands of delvers? Before today, the galaxy, so far as she knew, had never seen more than one in a single location. Likely they’d chosen to make themselves smaller to not crowd the region.

“Look at the things they’re sending out,” Sadie said.

Despite herself, Kimmalyne zoomed in on them. The proximity monitor had scans from long-range sensors, giving her visuals on the nearest of those little ships. They didn’t look like the balls of stone and destruction the delvers usually summoned. In fact, they looked...well...

...like little flying drones with claw arms. Sadie was right. They weren’t chasing Kimmalyne or the other fighter groups, though it had seemed that way at first. They were actually moving to the inhibitor stations.

“What under the heavens?”

## JORGEN

“This is extremely odd behavior,” Rinakin the UrDail said, stepping up beside Jorgen.

Jorgen nodded in agreement, watching the hologram, trying to figure out what the delvers were doing.

“I have studied each and every recording of a delver event,” Rinakin continued. “They’ve never done anything like this. Dare I hope something is different? Less deadly?”

“I wish I could be as optimistic as you,” Jorgen said, pointing. “What do they want with the inhibitors? Why are they going to them, then *vanishing*? Are those inhibitor fields falling?”

“They are!” an aide piped up. She rushed over with a datapad for him. “Each inhibitor station visited by a delver is dropping its field, suggesting the inhibitor slug inside has been destroyed.”

“Poor things,” Jorgen said. “I wonder if they bring the delvers pain.” He paused. Was there a way to get to some of the slugs before the delvers did? Dared he risk his people for that? It was why they’d come here. They could try to grab at least a few of those taynix before leaving. He moved to give the order, but was interrupted.

“Sir!” a man called from the comm station. “You’ll want to see this, sir!”

“What is it?” he asked, striding over with Rinakin and a swarm of kitsen generals. Even Ironsides joined them, peeking over his shoulder.

On the screen was a shot of the surface of Detritus. He felt sick as he saw the small delver ships appearing there. Of course. They ignored inhibition fields. Spensa had said that the shield around Starsight had delayed the delver that attacked there for a time, but Detritus’s shell had been no match for the one that had struck it in that old recording.

He couldn’t stop the delvers. If they wanted Detritus, they could take it. As evidenced by them appearing by the *thousand* on the surface.

“Time to scramble reserves,” he said. “We...wait. What are they doing? Can we zoom in?”

“I can move the drone closer,” the comms officer said, ordering it.

As it drew in, Jorgen could make out what the delver ships were doing. Each was depositing a *taynix* safely on the surface of Detritus. Then hyperjumping away.

He looked to the others, who seemed baffled.

“So, they’re *helping* now?” Rinakin said. “You see, optimism was warranted!”

“You might be right,” Jorgen said, looking back at the screen as increasing numbers of the slugs were dropped off safely, apparently having been *rescued* by the delvers. “I’ll admit, there was one element I wasn’t factoring in earlier that may have changed my expectations.”

“And what is that?” Rinakin asked.

“I’d momentarily forgotten,” Jorgen said, with a smile, “that Spensa was involved.”

## 56

I knew that some of the delvers hadn't accepted our help. I wasn't certain how many, but some. Those had lingered on the perimeter of the nowhere. Then they'd vanished, hiding again instead of accepting comfort and change.

Yes, they were people all right. A very different kind of people, but prone to the same inclinations. The majority changed for the better, fortunately. Some accepted it faster than the others, and those went to help the taynix. The slugs were first terrified, then relieved, their voices echoing in my mind. The delvers were rescuing the slugs trapped in the inhibitor stations.

But where was Brade? I pulled out of the nowhere. Found myself kneeling in a broken room, empty save for the rubble from our strange duel.

I double-checked and...I was...me?

Yeah, I was certain now. No more delver in my soul. It felt like taking off a blanket and exposing my sweaty skin to the air. It wasn't a *bad* feeling. Just odd.

I stumbled to my feet, then something appeared in my hands. A soft yellow-and-blue slug about the size of a loaf of bread.

"Doomslug!" I said.

"Doomslug!" she fluted.

I gave her a hug, though my left arm screamed in pain. Scud, I'd been shot—between the adrenaline and the subsequent communication with the delvers, I'd forgotten. Granted, it had been a grazing blow, but it still *hurt*.

Well, it seemed the delvers were taking the inhibitor slugs to safety. Which meant that despite lacking a delver in my soul, I could hyperjump out of here and get back to the others.

Before I did though, a voice entered my mind.

*Miss Nightshade? Chet asked. We have a problem.*

“Of course we do,” I said with a sigh. “What is it?”

*A short time ago, Brade contacted the main station via commslug. That slug just relayed what she said. The poor thing is quite alarmed, I must say. Brade intends to execute all of the slugs inside the station itself. Which is shielded. So...*

“So no help from the delvers?” I asked.

*They can break through a shield, as I attempted to do on Starsight so long ago, but it will take them time. I’m trying to explain the danger to my kin, but I fear we shall be too late to act upon this distressing turn. Spensa...Brade is flying there in person to see the order carried out.*

“She got in a starfighter?” I asked.

*Yes. Fortunately, the inhibitors closest to this region are still in effect. I’ve explained the problem to them, so the slugs are blocking her and refusing to go with the delvers. They won’t abandon the taynix on Evensong. But Miss Nightshade, she is getting close!*

Yes. But she’d climbed into a starfighter. And I knew where the station’s hangar bay was.

Doomslug under my arm, I leaped out into the hallway.

And very nearly got shot.

I was saved by a stumble, the destructor fire blasting over my head. With a shout, I dove back into the room, then apologized to Doomslug, who fluted at me in annoyance. I put her down.

Well, we’d just—

What was that?

“Chet?” I asked. “Something just changed.”

*Delver, he sent. One who didn’t...want to join us. It has come in your direction. I am pleading with it not to destroy you.*



His voice grew even more distant. And my ability to hyperjump was smothered.

I sighed, then seized a gun from the rubble. I peeked again into the hallway, but weapons fire from a half dozen soldiers set up behind a makeshift barricade drove me back. Brade had found much better troops than the ones who had been assigned to guard my prison. They knew how to keep me pinned, and each time I tried something I was forced right back into the room.

Scud. I didn't have time for this. If Brade reached Evensong—

"Greetings," a deep voice shouted in the hallway outside. "By tradition, the Masked Exile is supposed to announce himself before joining a battle. Consider this your warning!"

Was that...?

I poked my head out to see a tiny figure on a hover platform at the end of the hallway, behind the enemy barricade. Hesho?

Hesho was here?

Scud, he looked so small next to the enormous tenasi troops. They'd crush him. One turned a large assault rifle on him. As Hesho zipped forward on his small platform, a flash of light followed—sweeping in an arc in front of him.

The tenasi's head thumped to the floor outside the barricade. Hesho made a motion as if returning a tiny sword to its sheath at his side—but swords didn't make light like that, and little ones *certainly* didn't sweep through the air in a two-meter-long crescent like that one had.

Right, then. The flying fox samurai with a laser sword needed fire support. I burst into the hallway, gun at my unwounded shoulder, sighting and advancing in a steady walk. I fired on the troops, blasting body parts as they were exposed. Hesho made another sweep of light, then another.

What had been a fortified position became a killing field for confused troops trapped between two enemy forces. They tried to shoot him, but blasts went wild as he zipped about—a tiny target, difficult to hit.

Hesho finished off the last of the six as I stepped up, dumbfounded.

“Are you well?” he asked, hovering on his platform and panting softly. “You seem to have been injured at least once.”

“Hesho!” I said. “I want to hug you!”

“Because of the differences in size,” he said, raising a paw, “perhaps this human gesture will suffice.” He lifted his mask, smiling. And let me bump his paw.

“That weapon...” I said.

“Ah yes,” he said, patting the sheath at his side. “The Darting Hawk That Separates Sinew from Bone. A family weapon I fetched from Evershore when the assault was announced. You charge it like this...” He grabbed the sheath. “Then you whip it out like this...” It released a burst of energy when he swung, making the air glow. By the time he returned it to the sheath, it had stopped glowing. “Not the most efficient weapon, but it has a certain historical flair which I thought appropriate for my current station.”

“Thank you,” I said to him. “Whatever debt you owed me for helping you in the nowhere is paid.”

“Ah, but that is not how it works, Spensa,” he said. “You mistake me. I did not come here because of a debt.” He smiled. “I came to help a friend.”

I grinned back, then grabbed Doomslug and waved for Hesho to join me as I ran into the hangar bay. We just had to steal a ship and...

And the hangar bay was empty. No ships. Only some frightened officials trying to hide behind a stack of bins on the far side of the room.

There was no way for me to chase Brade down.

## 57

I fell to my knees, suddenly deflated. It felt as though all of my strength, intensity, and even anger had been sucked out of my body. I had been full of so many emotions for so long that coming down from them now felt enervating.

What...what had I expected? That Brade would leave a ship behind? Besides, all of the ships that had been in here had remote control functions that let her take them over, as she'd demonstrated before our "duel" earlier.

Doomslug fluted mournfully.

*Spensa?* a very quiet voice in my head said.

"I arrived in a small ship," Hesho said. "Though it fit only a kitsen, my poor ship is not in flying shape any longer. Those manning this station did not make my approach easy. I am sorry."

*Spensa? It's me. Your ghost.*

I nodded dully. I had been so certain it would come down to a duel between me and Brade. One final flight. One final time in the sky. What now? Could anyone else help the slugs of Evensong? Could I reach them through that delver's influence?

*M-Bot, I thought to him. I'm inhibited here, and I can't leave. Can you reach Jorgen?*

*I could, he thought. But I'm thinking...everyone else is helping. I want to help too.*

*Talk to Jorgen, I sent. Tell him that Brade is flying for Evensong, and we need to stop her. Somehow.*

*We should chase her down, he said. Together.*

*I'm sorry, I said—mentally, emotionally, physically exhausted. I never finished building your new body.*

*And I love you for trying, he said. Though to be honest, I don't think that shell would have worked. I can't be housed in a black box like that again. I'm so much more now.*

He was probably right. I felt sick. Even that was a failure.

*No, not a failure, he said. It showed me something. Set me thinking. You know what happens to delvers when they come into the somewhere?*

The air warped in front of me. Dust burst from a hole in space, like smoke shrouding something growing out of the nowhere. A delver...

No, M-Bot.

"They form a body for themselves!" I said.

*Not just a body, he said. A body in the shape they know. Of what used to house them. Of...*

The dust settled onto a shining black ship, vaguely W-shaped. With enormous boosters and a full complement of destructors. His ship. His *old ship*, but *made new*. Fitting his growth and what he'd become.

Oh, stars and *Saints*.

"Hi!" he said through a speaker on the front. "I've been resurrected! Do I start a religion now, or do I wait for you to do it for me? That part has always confused me."

"M-Bot!" I said, climbing to my feet. "You...I can't believe..."

"I have decided that I like being a spaceship," he said. "Having a body is nice. Thank you for giving me the idea. Anyway, are we going to...?"

Right. Right!

I leaped up, Doomslug in hand, and climbed into the waiting cockpit. Hesho flew down, and found—with an "ooo"—that M-Bot had made him a battle station with copilot controls. Doomslug had her own cushioned box. I helped her inside, then strapped in, and the canopy closed over me.

Finally, I put my hands on the controls. So familiar. So inviting. Not the ship I'd repaired in that cavern, but somehow still the same. If not better.

"I'm okay flying you?" I said to M-Bot.

“Please,” he said. “You’ve seen my attempts. You can be my chauffeur, mortal. That will leave me to the contemplation of various more important things, such as the nature of mushrooms.”

“A cold skin of dusk,” Hesho said solemnly, “yet thriving and beautiful, as only life knows.”

“Yes,” M-Bot said. “What he said.”

I grinned, then spun the ship using maneuvering thrusters so I didn’t hurt any of the officials hiding behind the bins, before blasting out into space. It felt so good. But scud, there was a *delver* hovering just overhead.

*Chet?* I sent.

*I have persuaded my associate, he replied, to sit back, watch, and see. Since you no longer are bonded to me, she is not as frightened of you as she once was. But be careful, her inhibitor field is up. It seems not all of our kind are going to be as accommodating as we’d like. So far, she is the only one actively working against you. But you have given us a sense of individuality, and...well, they’re using it.*

No problem. Because while Brade had a huge lead on me, I wasn’t in just any ship.

I was in M-Bot.

I pushed on his overburn and we *exploded* across the battlefield. Hesho helpfully called up a proximity overlay on the monitor, and showed me how to avoid those giant worm things. I skimmed along one of the monsters, angling toward Brade, and was past it before it had time to so much as look at me.

By M-Bot’s estimations, unfortunately, I would reach Brade just a little too late.

So I called her. Rather, I had M-Bot hack her comm so she would take my call even if she didn’t want to.

“Hello, Brade,” I said.

I was pleased to see her ship waver, jogging to the side, as if she expected that I’d be shooting soon after talking. That earned me a few seconds.

“You still want that duel?” I asked.

“You know I do,” she said, her voice tense.

“Great. Because you’re going to get it. You see me?”

She cursed softly, perhaps noting the velocity at which I was closing in. She didn’t have an advanced AI—or, well, delver—to calculate the difference in our speeds for her. She would just eyeball it, and had to be thinking that I would reach her soon. Flying straight when someone was coming up on your tail was deadly to a starfighter...

She broke off, going on the defensive.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

I slowed as I got closer. Acceleration was vital, but so was maneuverability, and you needed to balance the two. As I drew near, she came screaming back toward me.

Around us, delvers the size of battleships emerged in the void, sending out more drones—copies of M-Bot when he’d been housed in a little cleaning drone—to rescue taynix. Jorgen’s coalition ships began to appear near the installation we’d just left.

But I was only here for one fight. I needed this. I had to prove that I could win.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind though, a part of me chuckled. Why in the Saint’s name would I *need* to prove anything, after all I’d been through? I didn’t *need* to beat Brade in a starfighter duel. I *knew* I was good enough to do so, and even if not, who cared?

Scud.

*Scud!* Had I just outgrown...well, myself?

Brade wouldn’t want a fight either. This would be cover for some other plan. What was it? I thought I knew.

*Chet*, I sent, *you still there?*

*Indeed.*

*Contact Jorgen*, I sent. *I can’t do it with this inhibitor field, but you can cut through it. I need you to ask him to do something for me.*

## BRADE

Brade had no intention of dueling Spensa, of course. Fortunately, Spensa didn't know that. She'd always been about the contest, the fight. While Brade had always seen the big picture, the larger scope.

Like right now. With those inhibitors going down, she had an opening. She merely had to reach that open spot ahead, far enough from the delvers that she'd be able to jump away.

She made sure to make a good showing of dueling. Any less would get her killed. Spensa got on her tail—and if Brade was being honest, she couldn't have prevented that. So Brade legitimately gave it her best, diving along the outside of one of the vastworms, then firing a spray of shots along it to make it light up. That should slow...

Scrud. She could barely concentrate on her flying because Spensa was back there, weaving between the worm's tines with the energy of a child on a playground, fleet and precise. How? How did she *fly* like that?

Brade burst away from the vastworm on overburn, cutting close to some junk—and Spensa followed, making it seem *easy* as she light-lanced to change trajectory on a whim.

At each turn, Spensa got closer to Brade. So Brade went into her best evasives, but Spensa matched them turn for turn. And *kept getting closer*.

How? Scrud.

It was all right. A general didn't have to be able to fight every soldier on the battlefield. *Big picture*, she told herself. *You just need to be able to hyperjump*. Brade had managed to maneuver them closer and closer to that open spot with no inhibitor. Reach there, and she could escape.

Hell, from there she could hyperjump right to Evensong and fry the slugs. Then she'd jump to the intelligence stronghold on Varvaxin Three, which not even Cuna knew about.

She was almost free. Spensa didn't realize what—

A shot hit Brade's shield. Not from behind. But from *in front*. From her escape route. There, to her shock, a group of starfighters had just appeared. An entire flight.

"Cheating!" she said into the comm. "Spensa, you coward. This was supposed to be a duel! Just the two of us."

"That's the thing," Spensa said back. "It's not just the two of us, Brade. I'm not alone. I will never *be* alone. I'm part of something bigger. And when you pick a fight with one of us..."



## 59

“**Y**ou pick it with all of us,” I finished, grinning as Brade veered away from the freedom she’d been seeking. Ships stormed after her.

“Skyward Flight,” I said, “roll call and confirmation.”

“Skyward One,” said Arturo. “Callsign: Amphisbaena. And no, I’m never going to shorten it. I’m here, Spin.”

“Skyward Two,” said FM, voice firm and seemingly cold, yet I’d heard music from her cockpit just before she cut it off. “Temporary assignment to active flight duty. Callsign: FM. I’m here.”

“Skyward Three,” said Nedd’s affable, relaxed voice. “Callsign: Nedder. We’re here.”

“Nedd?” I asked, amazed. “You’re flying?”

“Well, I’m the copilot,” he said.

“Hello!” a kitsen voice said over the line. “I’m Hana! Nedder needed someone to fly.”

“All part of my plan,” he said. “I can take naps during battles now. Anyway, we’re here for you, Spin.”

Brade dodged right as shots chased her, her motions increasingly frantic.

“Skyward Four,” Alanik said in her own language. “Callsign: Angel. I’m here.”

Brade broke left, but more fire came from that direction, scoring her shield, lighting it up.

“Skyward Five,” Sadie said. I’d have to stop thinking of her as the new girl; she’d now been in the flight longer than I had when I’d left for

Starsight. "Callsign: Sentry. Um, I'm here!"

"Skyward Six," T-Stall said. "Callsign: T-Stall. Here."

"Skyward Seven," Catnip called. "Callsign: Catnip. I'm here. I can't believe I'm still mixed up with you lot."

"Skyward Eight," Kauri said, "and all thirty of us are here for you. Did...the Masked Exile arrive?"

"He is here," Hesho said from his controls. "And is grateful for your concern, and your leadership."

"Skyward Nine," Shiver said. "They say we need callsigns. I'm thinking Stalwart. We're here."

Dllllizzzz flashed her comm light, to indicate her presence as well.

"And I'm here too!" M-Bot said. "Hello, everyone! I've been resurrected. But I'm not starting a religion. I've decided they're too much work."

"Skyward Eleven," Kimmalyn said, moving her ship in next to mine. "Callsign: Quirk. I'm here."

I watched Brade's shield go down to a web of destructor blasts, and I sent a message telling the others to hold their fire.

"Skyward Zero," a voice said in my ear. Jorgen's wonderful voice. "Always with you, Spensa. Even when I can't be there in person. I told them that this time you hadn't run off. I *knew* you'd been kidnapped."

"Thank you," I said to him. "For believing in me."

Brade slowed her ship, realizing she was surrounded. Outgunned. I could see her turn her fighter toward me, could almost make out her expression as she considered.

Then she bolted, trying to escape.

I vaporized her cockpit with a single shot.

"Skyward Twelve," I whispered. "Callsign: Spin. *Confirmed.*"

# EPILOGUE

Valizode, as prime controller of the elected assembly, was *supposed* to be the most powerful being on the planet Monrome—homeworld of the dione people, center of culture for the entire Superiority. Yes, there were Superiority officers ranked higher than Valizode was, but they were out of contact right now. The Superiority was a mess anyway. So Valizode, well, they should have been the most important person around.

They didn't feel like it. Instead, they felt strangely cold as the others led them through the primary communications node on Byled. Now a mess of broken-open machinery, holes ripped into it like the hearts had been taken out for surgery.

It was a cold, icy thing to realize you—the most powerful person on a *planet*—were helpless.

"All of our communications systems," Lekilid said softly, gesturing to another set of ripped-open machines. "Every one on the *planet*. Even in the secret places of intelligence...they're all like this. Vandalized in a moment last night."

Valizode bared their teeth. Something they prided themselves on never doing. So uncivilized, it felt. But what other response was there?

"Same with the hyperdrives?" Valizode asked.

The other diones in the room nodded. Something, a force they didn't understand, had ripped into *every* ship in the system and taken out the hyperdrives. And the inhibitors. And every other secret piece of biological

technology on the planet. Somehow, this force had found them *all*, no matter how hidden. It was like nothing else ever recorded.

If reports were true—scattered and fragmentary as they’d been before communications had shut down—then this was happening all across the Superiority. Worse, something terrible and terrifying was involved. Delves.

Valizode left the room and stepped out onto a balcony, formal coat rustling as they put their hands on the railing and looked out over a sea of lights. Light to push back the darkness. Ever since the diones had achieved prime intelligence, they had been a light to the galaxy. Pushing back the twin darknesses of barbarism and aggression.

Now...

Now Valizode was scared.

Terrified.

“What do we do?” Yaksurma said, walking up, terror painted on their bifurcated face, half-blue, half-red. They were a draft, doing an internship. It was *supposed* to have been an easy couple of weeks for them to prove themselves. That had been before the reports had started coming in. First an assault on the secret Superiority taynix storage facility a few days back. Then terror around the galaxy.

Now this?

Valizode looked up at the sky, stars twinkling high above. It had been a long, *long* time since a dione had looked up there and been frightened. They’d mastered their universe. Claimed it. Until...now...

“We’re trapped,” Valizode whispered, taking it in, realizing it fully. “No communications off planet. No way to hyperjump. It would take *decades* to reach the next star system without a hyperdrive. We’re...alone.”

The others quieted, then began whispering in terror. Until a star fell from the sky. Then another. And more. Starfighters?

Were they saved?

Valizode hurried to where the fighters landed, but this was no salvation. They found a group of people, mostly humans, led by a tall female with short hair. She held a *taynix* in a special sling at her side, matching her uniform.

Out in the open? It made Valizode's skin crawl. Those things were supposed to be kept hidden.

"Ah," she said as Valizode climbed from the hovercar. "Minister Valizode, at last?"

"Yes?" Valizode said, forcing those teeth to remain unbared.

The human bared hers, brazenly. "I'm Provisional Ambassador Freyja Marten. Commander in the Defiant military, callsign: FM, if it matters."

"Does it?"

She gave a human shrug of the shoulders. "Just here to impart a little explanation. Food deliveries will be incoming, as I understand your planet is too populated to feed itself. You'll want to arrange for the distribution, and you can send requests for other supplies. If we determine they legitimately can't be produced locally, we'll accommodate the requests. The rest of the terms are here." She set a datapad on a table nearby.

One of the guards moved to take a shot at her. A *terribly* aggressive act, and it would have horrified Valizode under other circumstances. But, well, this *was* a human.

The human seemed to have been ready for it. Before the guard pulled the trigger, the human vanished. The shot zipped through empty air.

The human appeared next to the dione with the gun and pointedly took the weapon from their stunned hands. That taynix...it knew how to hyperjump on command. Without needing any equipment to corral it?

So dangerous! So aggressive!

"That was annoying of you," the human said. "If you keep acting like this, you'll never get offworld. And I was assured by your kind it was safe to visit you in person." She stalked back toward her ship.

"Human?" Valizode called. "Wait! Wait. I apologize for this *craven* act of *aggression* but...Please. When...when *do* we get to...to leave our planet again?"

"It's not up to me, so I can't say," the human said, pausing by her ship. The others were already climbing into theirs.

"Who is it up to?" Valizode said. "Can I speak to your government, plead our case? We...didn't know what Winzik was doing. We didn't

condone his war. We are *victims*.”

“This isn’t about his war,” she said. “It’s about what you’ve done as a society. And it’s not our government who gets to decide when you’re allowed off planet again.”

“Then who?” Valizode demanded.

The human gestured to her sling. And the taynix inside, who fluted out, “Who!”

Valizode’s horror grew more overpowering. “The...the *hyperdrives* decide?”

“Yup,” she said, climbing up to her cockpit. “Good luck.”

Oh.

Oh *no*.

—

One week after the victory at Evensong, I stood overseeing yet another delivery of slugs. And I tried to pretend that nothing was wrong with me.

After all, things were great. The delvers had taken their duty to heart, and their first act of compassion involved saving the taynix, rescuing every “hyperdrive” that wanted to be rescued. And the other types—every single one of them. In the galaxy.

“It’s a good thing we have a whole planet full of places like this,” I said, standing at an outcropping overlooking a cavern on Detritus. One of the many I’d explored as a kid. It was now packed with happily fluting slugs feasting on bins of mushrooms and algae.

Jorgen stepped up beside me, holding a datapad, which was full of statistics about caverns that could be turned into taynix housing. Based on our estimates, we’d have to find room for several hundred thousand taynix. Not impossible, but it would be difficult to ramp up the wholesale agricultural operations necessary to provide food for them all.

Fortunately, there was already a robust system of food delivery across the galaxy, and there were enough taynix willing to continue doing their

jobs for now to keep that running. So long as we gave them freedom and let them take breaks, with others taking turns.

That meant there would be no interruptions in food supplies, though many luxuries would have to stop being traded for now. Indeed, there would be complications, as the planets providing the food weren't being fairly compensated—though initial talks with all of them found the people there excited by the idea of being able to trade their food for more unfettered access to travel. With all this, Jorgen was certain he could hold mass starvation at bay across the galaxy.

Regardless, for now we'd be able to feed the taynix with shipments from off planet, and it seemed Detritus *could* work perfectly for growing a crop favored by the taynix. Mushrooms.

Jorgen smiled. He liked a challenge, and this was the perfect one for him. An organizational nightmare perhaps—but running what was essentially the biggest refugee camp in the galaxy was going to take ingenuity. Plus the invention of a *ton* of new rules.

He'd only oversee it, while others did much of the work. He would be stuck with a large number of duties in the newly forming galactic alliance. There was talk of a new government to replace the Superiority, but it was *way* too soon for something like that. For now it was just an alliance, with some shared rules and a moderator running a kind of galactic forum.

Nobody wanted a human in that position, of course, though they didn't say it outright. Fortunately, Rinakin of the UrDail was extremely well-liked. He was the most likely candidate to run the thing. The humans from Detritus—and the other human preserves—would have to find their way in what this was becoming. Once, I would have said we'd end up as soldiers, and certainly we'd need to keep up our space forces. But we had another specialty these days: slug care.

Scud. My stomach twisted. I fought it down.

"This is going to be their planet," Jorgen said. "As it always kind of was. We're just here to help."

"And try to figure out...what the terms mean," I said.

He nodded, his expression a little more grim. The taynix and the delvers had a treaty. One that *didn't* include the rest of us. It involved how often, and how quickly, the slugs would hyperjump anyone but themselves—to prevent too much somewhere incursion into the nowhere.

Most of the delvers didn't feel pain when we traveled the nowhere any longer, but some did, as they'd refused our help. Which was, I supposed, their right. And collectively, the delvers were asserting that the nowhere was their territory. It had existed outside of time and space before their arrival, and they liked it that way, even healing as they were. I wasn't certain it was right for them to claim an entire dimension, but at the same time, what right did any of us have to the land—or the airspace—that we claimed?

They were willing to work with us, but I'd essentially shattered them into a ton of arguing individuals. They were much more aligned than any other species, because of their origins, but still. Things would be complicated for a while.

Regardless, hyperjumping—at least with a taynix—was going to be limited going forward: the taynix would give a warning to the delvers, then wait for permission. So far, that permission could take anywhere from a few seconds to a half hour—though it could in some cases be arranged ahead of time.

Both groups were undecided on what to do about cytonics like me. We might have to negotiate our own treaty or risk their wrath. Again, it was uncertain.

Still, having answers—and some measure of safety from the delvers—felt good. So I tried to keep my stress and worry from showing as I joined Jorgen in the lift, heading back to the surface.

“Is this about us?” he asked. “How tense you are?”

Scud. He'd noticed. So I took him by the arm, made him lean down, and kissed him. “Not about us.”

He relaxed. “Good.”

“I'm fine,” I said. “Just getting used to the new role. Slug wrangler.”

“Doesn't seem to fit into Gran-Gran's stories,” he said.



“I don’t *have* to live as if I’m in those stories,” I said. “I’ve grown beyond that.”

“You’re still you.”

“The me I am is happy to be here,” I said. “With you. Just give me time. I’ll get used to things being boring. Kimmalyn says boring is good. She can’t shut up about it! The Saint apparently had lots to say about doing nothing being nothing to do.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” he said, but kissed me again. For a moment that was enough. I lost myself in his warmth, in the press of his lips on mine, his pulse matching mine. I held on to him, feeling embarrassed and thrilled all at once that the doors to the elevator could open at any time, exposing our moment of intimacy.

I loved him, genuinely. I wanted to be with him forever.

It was just...well, everything else. The world wasn’t ending. And I... seemed to thrive when it was.

What an absolutely *terrible* personality attribute to have.

We finally, with effort, stopped kissing as the elevator slowed and we arrived at Alta Base. Arm in arm, we stepped out and turned along the path. We still used Jorgen’s old garage, and his hovercar that was inside. He kept talking about learning to tinker with it, as a hobby. Something people were able to have when they weren’t at war. He talked about seeing how high he could get it to fly—as if he couldn’t demand a starfighter at any moment.

Just before we reached the garage, his comm beeped. He gave me a chagrined look, but I left him to it. Some new species we were approaching, wanting seats in the new galactic forum. I wandered over to his garage, then past it to the adjacent hangar.

It was big enough for two ships. Inside, M-Bot—still in his ship form—was chatting with Hesho, who was sitting on the wing, sharpening a sword. The kitsen waved as I entered, and Doomslug fluted from beside him, making a sound like the scraping of the sword on stone.

Behind them was another ship. Chet’s. He stood up from the cockpit, wearing overalls and a cap, his vibrant mustaches extending from beneath his nose. “Bother!” he said. “You realize how annoying shaving is? I never

had to do that when I didn't have a real physical presence, Miss Nightshade. It is *most* uncomfortable!"

Turned out, delvers weren't limited to making stone and rock. Chet was having fun learning to be human. And by "fun," I meant he was mostly making all the same annoying observations about human bodies that I'd spent months hearing from M-Bot. At least in Chet's case, the complaints seemed more commiserative. For example, he hadn't realized that if you didn't sleep, you got headaches.

I picked up a cloth and started cleaning M-Bot, who needed a good mopping up after our last flight to inspect a distant set of caverns. I worked in silence for a time, enjoying the quiet moment, when Rodge called.

"Yo, Rig," I said, as M-Bot piped through the comm. "How's life untangling the mysteries of the universe?"

"Ugh," he said.

"That good?"

"FM keeps going down in person and getting shot at," he said. "What is with her?"

"She just wants the excitement," I said.

"That's not what she says."

"What does she say?"

"That she needs to ensure, personally, that the instructions are received by the proper authorities."

"Excitement," I said. "I empathize."

"It can't be getting dull for you already, Spensa," he said. "It's only been a few days!"

"Longer than I've ever gone without getting shot at."

"Liar," he said. "You realize I've known you most of your life, right?"

"Then you know that I'm prone to exaggeration," I said. "So what's new?"

He chuckled. "Well, I just wanted to let you know I've sent Jorgen something interesting. It might help."

I frowned. "What?"

“He asked for it, and I found it in all of this mess of information we’re getting from the Superiority’s primary databases. Just try not to break anything. Rig out. Thanks, by the way.”

“For?”

“For dragging me into this.” He cut the line. I was left confused as Jorgen walked back in carrying a datapad.

“All right,” I said, hands on my hips. “What scheming have you two been doing?”

He turned it toward me. It seemed to be a list of coordinates.

“Unexplored planets,” he said. “Deemed too dangerous by the Superiority. There’s practically *nothing* listed about them other than warnings to stay away.”

“Which could mean...” I said, snatching it.

“Anything,” he said. “From a taynix refuge to some kind of very aggressive species to...who knows what they determined was too dangerous to even record? Seems mysterious to me.”

I took it, then looked at him, narrowing my eyes. “You just want to keep me busy.”

“Of course I want to keep you busy,” he said. “Doing something important.” He rapped the datapad. “Earth is out there somewhere, Spensa. Either in the nowhere, or here. Something happened with it. And the figments—we know next to nothing about them. And what about the traps we found on the portals into the nowhere? Those have existed far longer than the delvers. There might be dangers out there we don’t know about. Better to explore them than to be surprised.”

I grinned. Then paused and looked at him.

“What?” he said.

“I can’t go alone.”

“Kimmalyn, despite what she says, is bored of being bored. And I suspect Chet wants to go do some humaning.”

“Right you are!” he called.

“So,” Jorgen said, “you won’t go alone.”

I felt an immediate thrill. Then paused. “Will this...interfere with us? If I’m gone this much?”

“I don’t want you to be anyone but you,” he said. “And if you’re sure nothing about us is bothering you—”

“It’s not us. Nothing is wrong with us. I love us. Unless you want something new, that is. Just tell me, and I’ll shut up. Only not, because I never do.” I cringed. Then kissed him, because I knew that worked.

He grinned as I pulled back. “I’m commissioning you a flight, as explorers, to map these planets. Recruit up to three other pilots. Just promise to come back and check in with me.”

“Every day,” I promised. “So long as I can manage it.”

He nodded. But he didn’t seem certain. So I kissed him again, then added, softer, “Jorgen. I *will* come back. Every day that I can, for time with you. This is where I belong.”

“You belong wherever it’s not boring.”

“I *belong* with all of you, even if I *need* to do other things sometimes. Learning that is basically the point of half the stories, Jorgen. Didn’t you listen to Gran-Gran?”

“I thought those stories always left the heroine changed,” he said.

“They do. And they did.”

“In the stories she leaves, because she no longer fits in where she began.”

“In the stories, yes,” I whispered. “But Jorgen, there’s one huge flaw in *all* of those stories.”

“Which is?”

“None of them had you.”

I managed to get through to him with that one, I think. He smiled, then seemed actually a little bashful.

“If there’s one thing that all of this has taught me,” I said to him, “it’s that I get to choose for myself. I’ll let you distract me with these planets to explore, Jorgen Weight, but don’t you dare think it’s going to give you *too* much of a break from me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

I let go of him, then went to show the data to Doomslug, Chet, Hesho, and M-Bot. But before I did, I called back to Jorgen.

“Hey,” I said. “By the way...”

“Yeah?”

“Just remember, if I accidentally unleash some kind of gigantic galactic threat—then have to blow up a star or something to crush its skull and turn it into a red pulp the size of a planetary ring—this was *your* idea.”

He laughed, and left me to it. Though the actual details weren’t that important, so I let Hesho read them off to the others, who chatted about where to go first. I stepped outside and looked up. There was an odd convergence taking place, a hole through the many layers of platforms that protected Detritus. Leading upward.

Toward the stars. I belonged there. But the lights that glowed in my friends were far brighter.

I ducked back inside, and asked M-Bot to call Kimmalyn and tell her the good news. That I’d just dragged her into a potentially life-threatening adventure.

Again.

THE END OF THE  
SKYWARD SERIES

THE UNIVERSE WILL  
CONTINUE IN  
SKYWARD LEGACY

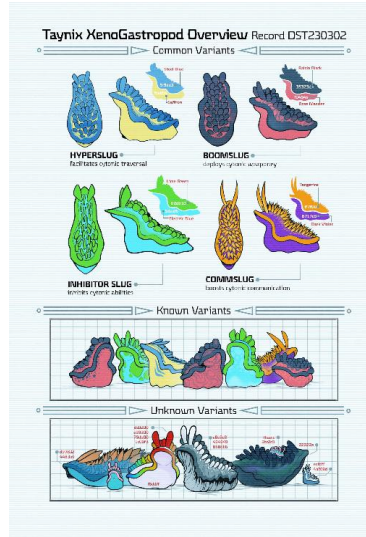


# Appendix: Illustrations in Plain Text Format

Several illustrations in this ebook were captured as images to retain their original formatting. In this section, those images are available as plain text.



# Taynix XenoGastropod Overview, Record DST230302

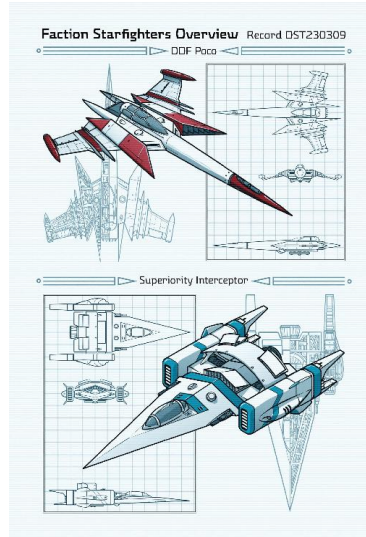


Common Variants: Hyperslug, facilitates cytonic traversal. Has mid-sized, rounded back spines. Back spines are steel blue (color code 5F9BD3) and belly is saffron (color code FBE854). Boomslug, deploys cytonic weaponry. Has mid-sized, rounded back spines. Back spines are raisin black (color code 35323D) and belly is rose madder (color code F0454B). Inhibitor Slug, inhibits cytonic abilities. Has mid-sized, narrow, plate-like back spines. Back spines are lime green (color code 62D910) and belly is electric blue (color code 5DED9B). Commslug, boosts cytonic communication. Has mid-sized, pointed back spines and two extra-long pointed antennae near the front. Back spines are tangerine (color code FF7F00) and belly is dark violet (color code 8717CB). There are seven known and understood variants of taynix, with various colors, spines, and exterior patterns. There are also seven reported variants that are unknown. Four of these unknown variants are large, and two of the large variants have bicolored spines as well as a third color for their bellies. Three of the unknown variants are

quite small, less than a third of the size of the known and the larger unknown variants.

[Return to illustration in Chapter 1.](#)

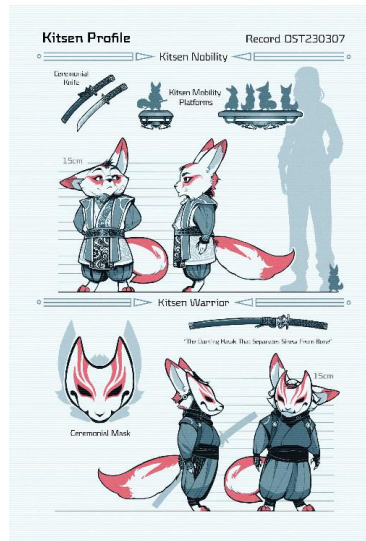
# Faction Starfighters Overview, Record DST230309



DDF Poco. Detailed schematics of the Poco from above, from the front, and from the side. Partial schematic of the inner workings of the ship. The Poco is basically triangular from the top, but with complex wing systems and a long, narrow nose. Superiority Interceptor. Detailed schematics of the Interceptor from above, from the front, and from the side. Partial schematic of the inner workings of the ship. Compared to the Poco, the Interceptor has a much broader, flatter nose and a simpler, boxier area at the rear for engines and weaponry.

[Return to illustration in Chapter 4.](#)

# Kitsen Profile, Record DST230307

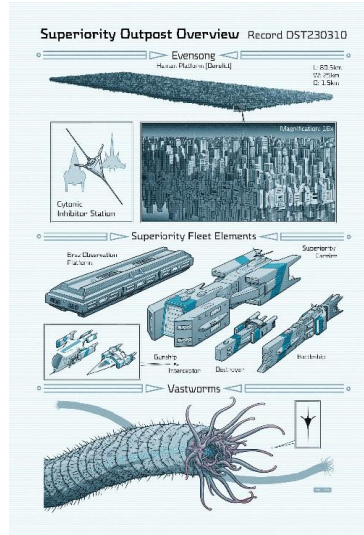


Kitsen Nobility. An illustration of a ceremonial knife, both sheathed and unsheathed. It is shaped like a very short katana and has elaborate hilt wrappings. Kitsen mobility platforms, with illustrations of a platform sized for a single kitsen and another sized for several. An illustration of an elaborately dressed kitsen shows it standing at 15 centimeters tall, and shows the many-layered robes their nobility wear, with each layer displaying a different flowing or rounded pattern. Under the robes, the kitsen wears loose, puffed pants that draw tight at the ankle. A scale drawing shows a kitsen silhouette next to a human one, with the kitsen coming to the top of the human's boot. Kitsen Warrior. An illustration of a sheathed, katana-like sword with an interesting mechanism of unspecified purpose at the base of the blade and above the hilt. The blade is called The Darting Hawk That Separates Sinew From Bone. An illustration of a ceremonial mask, which is primarily white with simple, flowing accents framing the eyeholes, dropping down from the ears, and tracing a smile of exaggerated length. A side view and a front view of a warrior wearing more

practical robes than the nobility, wearing the mask, and carrying the named sword.

[Return to illustration in Chapter 18.](#)

# Superiority Outpost Overview, Record DST230310

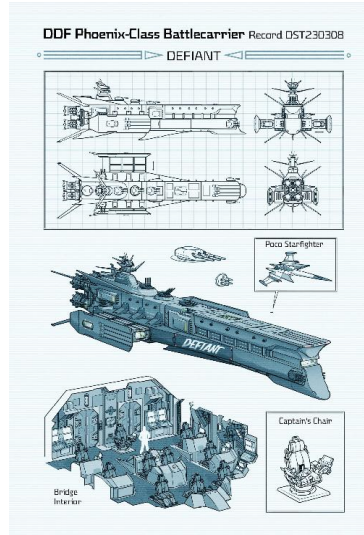


Evensong, Human Platform [Derelict]. A long rectangular platform covered with tall rectangular buildings. Length: 80.5 kilometers. Width: 25 kilometers. Depth: 1.5 kilometers. A sixteen-times magnification of the platform shows the rectangular buildings clumped tightly together and both rising from and descending below the core plane of the platform. An inset illustration of a cytonic inhibitor station compares it to silhouettes of the DDF Poco and Superiority Interceptor; this comparison shows that the pyramid-shaped inhibitor with dual antennae has a comparable mass to a Poco. Superiority Fleet Elements. The Brez Observation Platform is a long, narrow, rectangular vessel with many window ports. A Superiority Carrier is a boxy vessel about as long as the Brez, with many ports on the front and sides and weapons banks mostly along the top of the ship. A Destroyer is a little less than half the length of the Carrier and much less tall; it is shaped like a skinny rectangle with two smaller rectangular engines strapped to the sides. In size, the Battleship is midway between the Carrier and the Destroyer; it is shaped more similarly to the Destroyer, but with more

weapons banks and only one engine instead of two. A Gunship and an Interceptor are shown for size comparison; they are smaller than any given port or weapons bay on the larger ships. Vastworms. An illustration of one end of a wrinkly tube of a creature that is sparsely covered in cilia-like hairs and clusters of black and white spots. The worm's face, if you can call it that, is a twisting mass of long and short tentacles clustered around a mouth. In the background, a silhouette of a full vastworm compares to a silhouette of an inhibitor station; the inhibitor station is the size of the rounded ends of the worm's smaller face tentacles.

[Return to illustration in Chapter 27.](#)

# DDF Phoenix-Class Battlecarrier, Record DST230308

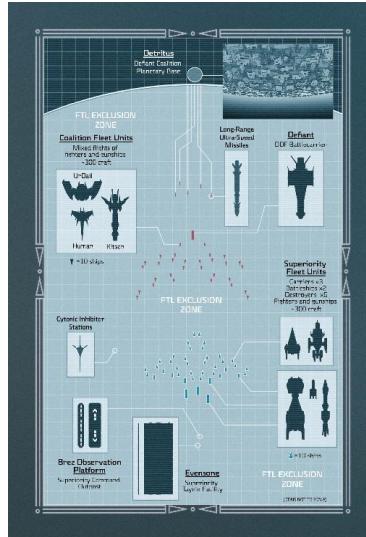


DDF Phoenix-Class Battlecarrier, Record DST230308. Defiant. A detailed schematic showing four perspectives on the Defiant against a square grid: the top, bottom, front, and rear of the ship. Below is a full rendering of the Defiant from the front and the side. Its shape is reminiscent of an Earth navy vessel, tapering at the front and widening at the rear, and has retractable bays in the aft half of the ship with ports to allow starfighters to launch. A Poco is shown for size comparison; it is the size of one of the many window pairs along the starboard side of the Defiant. Below that is a rendering of the Defiant's bridge, which has a captain's chair and nine other workstations spread throughout the rectangular room. An inset illustration of the captain's chair shows abundant cushioning and several attachments with screens, keyboards, spherical controls, and other input devices.

[Return to illustration in Chapter 30.](#)



## A Two-Dimensional Battle Map Showing a Portion of the FTL Exclusion Zone



A circle marks the location of Detritus, just outside the FTL exclusion zone. Several angular lines show missiles launching from Detritus into the exclusion zone. The Coalition Fleet units are arrayed against the Superiority Fleet units. The Coalition ships are mixed flights of fighters and gunships totaling approximately 300 ships. The diagram shows silhouettes of the human, UrDail, and kitsen ships, and shows black triangles on the map, with each triangle representing 10 ships. Thirty black triangles are arrayed in groups of two ahead of a rectangle representing the Defiant. Across from the Coalition forces, 30 white triangles, each triangle representing 10 Superiority fighter and gunships, are arrayed in front of six rectangles representing Destroyers, two slightly larger rectangles for battleships, and three still-larger rectangles for carriers. Behind this large force is a point marked as the location of the Brez Observation Platform, and behind that is the location of Evensong, the Superiority Taynix Facility.

[Return to illustration in Chapter 34.](#)

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, a ton of work is done to put each and every one of these books together. I hope the list of names doesn't make your vision start to blur! But also, I hope you take the time to scan through and look at the many important people who are involved in the process.

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—Brandon

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Matt “The Innkeeper” Hatch is Dragonsteel’s VP of Operations, with Jane Horne, Kathleen Dorsey Sanderson, Makena Saluone, Hazel Cummings, and Becky Wilson.

Adam Horne, a.k.a. Schrödinger’s Golfer (simultaneously being both the best and worst at golf in the company), is our VP of publicity and marketing, with Jeremy Palmer, Taylor D. Hatch, and Octavia Escamilla.

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**BRANDON SANDERSON** is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Reckoners series: *Steelheart*, *Firefight*, *Calamity*, and the e-original *Mitosis*; the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Skyward series: *Skyward*, *Starsight*, *Cytonic*, and *Defiant*, as well as *Skyward Flight: The Collection*, with Janci Patterson; the internationally bestselling Mistborn saga; and the Stormlight Archive. He was chosen to complete Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than thirty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Brandon lives and writes in Utah.

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